TANG JIU QING

BALLAD of SWORD & WINE 7

QIANG JIN JIU

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Chapter 224:
A Sharp Turn

THE SUN-SHOWER ACROSS the palace roofs ended as abruptly as it'd begun. Liang Cuishan's boots were speckled with mud as he strode into the Ministry of Revenue, the hem of his robe held high in his hand. All the officials knew the grain recount that awaited them and were at the ready. As the tapping of rain outside came to a stop, Liang Cuishan wiped a thin film of sweat off his face with a handkerchief. Without further ado, he announced, "Gentlemen, when you're ready."

Immediately, the room filled with the sound of abacus beads, as if the unexpected downpour had started again inside the office.

After assuring himself he still carried the Grand Secretariat's writ within his lapels, Liang Cuishan settled in a chair and buried his head in the mountains of account books from the eight cities. His mental arithmetic was outstanding, and he was well versed in taxes and levies, so he worked through the accounts quickly—but to be safe, he still kept an abacus, brush, and paper within reach.

The rain of abacus beads within the Ministry of Revenue's office drummed through the night, broken only by the footfalls of the errand runners coming in and out with strong tea to keep everyone awake.

Although her wing of the palace was far outside this din, the empress dowager could not sleep either.

Incense burned inside the hall where she sat, sending smoke spiraling upward. The empress dowager moved the prayer beads one by one with her thumb as she reclined on the settee. Liuxiang, her only company, gently pounded on her legs. The empress dowager, having already removed her eastern pearls, shut her eyes in repose, her face wan.

"Commander Han Cheng has already had a word with Fuman," Liuxiang reassured her in a soft voice. "The heir apparent should be making her move any moment now."

The empress dowager opened her eyes slightly. “The heir also spoke up during the discussion in Mingli Hall today. I can see Kong Boran has had a change of heart toward her; he truly thinks of her as his student now.”

“It’s all because of that Xue Yanqing.” Liuxiang kneaded with a practiced rhythm. “She was raised outside the palace. What does she know of governance?”

“She has no instinct for when to press forward and when to hold back, and no sense of either priority or propriety. If she wishes to interfere in affairs of state, she needs to know what she’s doing. Qi Zhuyin’s reluctance today about the betrothal must be because she thinks Xue Xiuzhuo can still find a way out of his predicament. They’re doing a recount of the eight cities’ grain as we speak.” The empress dowager held up her hand and studied the prayer beads wrapped around her fingers. “By all means, let them.”

Under the dimmed lanterns, the empress dowager appeared calm and unruffled, without so much as a tremble of panic.

In contrast, within the Ministry of Revenue, Liang Cuishan was growing increasingly alarmed. Surrounded by the clatter of abacus beads, he plucked at his own a few times to check his results, but they were the same as his mental calculations. There were no discrepancies in the Dancheng granary’s reserves as reported by the Ministry of Revenue. Based on this report of surplus grain, the granaries in the eight cities, far from vacant, were the most abundant in the Zhou empire.

How could that be?

Liang Cuishan pushed away the abacus and stood. He grabbed his handkerchief and wiped fresh sweat from his face.

Pan Lin sat in the chair within his cell, candlelight illuminating his pale face. He had been locked up for several days already, the rumpled hems of his robe evidence of the noble young master’s wretched plight. Still, he pushed himself to stay awake, regarding Xue Xiuzhuo with tired eyes.

“You knew about the eight cities’ granaries when you audited their field taxes at the start of the year.” Xue Xiuzhuo was tired too. He covered

his eyes with a damp handkerchief for a moment to gather himself. “The granaries of the eight cities have long been empty, right?”

Pan Lin answered with silence.

“Chengzhi.” Xue Xiuzhuo addressed Pan Lin by his courtesy name. “You let Yao Yuanzhuo go because you have a kind heart. You aren’t cut from the same cloth as Wei Huaigu and his ilk; why do their work against your conscience? So many starved in Dancheng last year. If the court can’t resurvey the land and return the fields to the commoners, many more will die again.”

Pan Lin’s throat bobbed. He tilted his head back and stared at the pitch-dark ceiling.

“Qi Zhuyin has repeatedly come to the capital to ask for military salaries; even now, the Qidong Garrison Troops can’t move out. Meanwhile, the Twelve Tribes are knocking on the Bianjun Commandery’s door.” Xue Xiuzhuo’s eyes were bloodshot after sleepless nights of torment. “Chengzhi, I need grain.”

A moth had floated down onto the windowsill. In the silence, it took flight once more, diving across the night.

Wandering through the dark, it brushed past a speeding carriage that stopped at the steps of a manor. Hua Xiangyi leapt out as soon as Hongying lifted the curtain.

“Mistress—”

Lifting the hem of her skirt, Hua Xiangyi stepped over the threshold and broke into a run, the pearls on her hairpin swinging. Gasping for breath, she raced through the long walkways and labyrinthine courtyards of the manor, ignoring the startled shouts around her as she sped toward Qi Zhuyin’s courtyard.

Qi Wei was speaking to the attendants in the courtyard when Hua Xiangyi swept in. Startled and thinking there was an assassin, he shouted, “Protect the marshal!”

Qi Zhuyin’s guards drew their sabers, the glint of their blades a reflection of the luster of Hua Xiangyi’s swaying pearls, so bright the cold frost of the moon seemed dim by comparison. The hairpin slipped free,

spilling pearls over Qi Zhuyin the moment she opened the door. Hua Xiangyi hastily held back the sweep of loose hair at her temple.

A thin sheen of sweat covered Hua Xiangyi's brow. She took a moment to catch her breath. "The Dancheng granary is empty. No matter how much surplus grain the Ministry of Revenue reports"—Hua Xiangyi looked into Qi Zhuyin's eyes, still clutching her skirt—"it's a smokescreen."

Qi Zhuyin returned the fallen hairpin to Hua Xiangyi. She turned to Qi Wei, who took one look at her and raced out of the courtyard at full tilt to send a messenger to Liang Cuishan.

It was well past midnight. In a few hours, the imperial court officials would gather outside the palace gates to wait for the morning court session to begin. Time was of the essence.

Pan Lin had fallen silent after Xue Xiuzhuo's exhortation. He was a scholar, learned in the words of the sages; he couldn't bring himself to look directly into Xue Xiuzhuo's eyes. Gazing at the ceiling, he saw the timeworn traces of years of disrepair on the beams. Parts yet to be covered by new paint lay exposed, their surfaces bored through with fine insect holes—rotten to the core.

He felt a cool draft. He counted those tiny insect holes, slowly killing himself with the blunt blade of his conscience. He knew Xue Xiuzhuo's expression could well be an act, and yet he also knew Xue Xiuzhuo had spoken the truth. Over the days he'd spent in this cell, his silence had been more than simple evasion.

"Let me ask you." Pan Lin lowered his head from contemplating the ceiling, finally willing to meet Xue Xiuzhuo's eyes. "Why did you try to kill Yuanzhuo?"

Xue Xiuzhuo leaned back in his chair and returned Pan Lin's gaze.

"You want to prop up the Li Clan," Pan Lin continued, "and so did Secretariat Elder Hai. Together you supported the Tianchen Emperor and took Hua Siqian off the board." He lifted his shackled hands onto the table. "But then you killed the Tianchen Emperor so you could put forward the

heir apparent. Xue Yanqing, you hide beneath the rolling waves. I can't begin to guess if you're a loyal sage or a treacherous sycophant."

He needed an answer. Here was Xue Xiuzhuo's opportunity to justify those unbecoming deeds that violated the principles of the virtuous gentleman. He only needed to give Pan Lin a valid reason, and he would score a complete victory.

But Xue Xiuzhuo refused. "I tried to kill Yao Yuanzhuo because he deserved to die."

After this long night, he no longer looked as prim and proper as usual. He had gone so far as to loosen his tightly fastened official's robe as he sat opposite Pan Lin. "The noble clans think they still rule this court, but the truth is, they'd already lost control of the ship by the last years of Yongyi. Look at your father—if the noble clans were still as powerful as they imagine themselves to be, would he have needed to sit on the fence between the noble clans and the officials of humble origins? The fall of Zhongbo showed me one thing."

Xue Xiuzhuo extended a finger and pointed toward the ground. "Even as the noble clans infiltrate every institution in this country, they are being infiltrated. Hua Siqian thought he could outplay Amur in the east, but in the end, he was no more than a jackal Amur leashed while eyeing our land. And the most ludicrous part? Right up until his death, Hua Siqian still thought he was the one holding the chain.

"My teacher Secretariat Elder Hai and I watched the Prince of Libei rise to power. The Libei Armored Cavalry became a valiant army in the northeast, but they did not place themselves at the throne's disposal. Their commanders' surnames are Xiao. No matter how loyal Xiao Fangxu and Xiao Jiming claimed they were to the throne, the Libei Armored Cavalry would never accept a commanding general from Qudu. They call themselves a pack of wolves, an iron wall. They're not wrong—they are indeed an impenetrable fortress—but while they block out the Biansha Horsemen, they also block Qudu.

"Had the empress dowager not inserted herself into the court, the Guangcheng Emperor would have surely disbanded the Libei Armored Cavalry in the later years of his reign. The last time they were truly an army subordinate to the Li Clan was when they were still called the Luoxia

Cavalry. Don't tell me Xiao Fangxu didn't understand this. Yet he was unwilling to hand over his military power. He believed in himself. And perhaps he did nothing wrong—but ultimately, he couldn't prevent his armored cavalry from growing less flexible by the day.

"Many denounced Qudu's paranoia. But who could guarantee that such a large and powerful force would always have a clear-headed commander at its helm? Even Xiao Fangxu himself knew it was impossible. What we needed were not verbal promises or personal trust, but real checks and balances on power. Xiao Fangxu understood long ago that he would have to hand over a son to Qudu. My teacher looked for an appropriate opportunity for him to do so, in consideration of Libei's dignity and friendship with Qudu. But before he could act, Hua Siqian, in trying to make up for the state treasury deficit, handed the six prefectures of Zhongbo to Amur on a silver platter. As a result, the catalyst for Xiao Chiye's entry into the capital became a festering wound between Qudu and Libei.

"Do you understand now? Scorpions from the desert are lurking in these murky waters. Amur used them to spread rot through the empire, yet the noble clans feigned ignorance. Teacher and I bent over backward to prop Li Jianheng up on the throne in the hope that he could clean up the imperial court. But he was a useless fool.

"As for Yao Yuanzhuo, his reputation had grown to terrifying proportions—but he would never put it to use for Qudu. If I didn't kill him, he would inevitably be used by others. All of you aided Yao Yuanzhuo out of some so-called sense of righteousness. Go see for yourself the surge of reputable scholars flocking to Zhongbo now, where he is giving counsel to Shen Zechuan."

Xue Xiuzhuo was quiet for a long time before he continued expressionlessly, "I am neither a loyal sage nor a treacherous sycophant."

What, then, was he?

He didn't know either.

He'd received Mister Changzong's guidance in his early years of schooling and thought he would become a gentleman of virtue. In years past, he had held Qi Huilian in high esteem, and even had several meaningful exchanges with the grand mentor when he was in Xue Xiuzhuo's hands. He had thought Qi Huilian would understand his

aspirations, but ultimately the man had rejected him. He had also respected Hai Liangyi and willingly put himself at his beck and call. To this day, he still called Hai Liangyi his teacher. But Hai Liangyi had staunchly believed Li Jianheng could become a benevolent emperor under his guidance, while Xue Xiuzhuo could wait no longer. He needed a sovereign who could split the chaos and create a new world. If no such candidate was available, Xue Xiuzhuo could only press on and make one, by any means necessary.

He needed neither sympathy nor a willing ear; he was prepared to pay an exponential price for all he'd done. He had only one life, and he was gambling with it now, in the twilight of the Zhou empire. Whether or not the dawn that came after the long night was the one he sought, he would fight for it with all he had.

This was Great Zhou's last chance, as well as his own.

Pan Lin buried his face in his hands. After a long time, he spoke. "I was aware of Wei Huaigu's forged accounts when I served as the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Revenue. I knew there were discrepancies in the Dancheng field taxes." He looked up, revealing eyes surrounded by fine lines. "But my surname is Pan, and there's only so much…"

He trailed off and rubbed his face hard a few times.

Hurried footsteps echoed outside the cell. Pan Lin and Xue Xiuzhuo sat in silence as the noise pressed in toward them. In the last moment before the door opened, Pan Lin said wearily, "Empty. The eight cities are all empty."

Xue Xiuzhuo shot to his feet. Before the clerk behind him could open his mouth, Xue Xiuzhuo wiped the fatigue from his face and fastened his collar, then nodded once to Pan Lin. "Thanks."

Figures moved outside the cell. Just as Xue Xiuzhuo stepped through the door, Pan Lin said, "In repressing your own desires so completely, you've pushed yourself far beyond what any common man could endure. You said it yourself: Great Zhou needs checks and balances. But what can the heir apparent possibly use to hold *you* in check?"

Xue Xiuzhuo looked sidelong at him and didn't answer.

As he watched Xue Xiuzhuo leave, Pan Lin seemed to understand something. The door to the cell creaked closed, leaving him sitting alone. A

weak bar of morning light filtered through the small window beside him, but it didn't land on Pan Lin.

He had done his best.

Pan Xiangjie rummaged through chests and cupboards searching for his account books. Those moldy old records that had accumulated at the bottom of his drawers were now lethal weapons that could effect his downfall. He had heard the news as soon as he woke; he needed to burn everything before Xue Xiuzhuo arrived.

The reign of Yongyi. The reign of Xiande. The reign of Tianchen.

Finally, Pan Xiangjie found the chest where he had bundled all these accounts neatly. Kneeling, he yanked the cord apart with his bare hands, then threw all the books into the copper basin.

There were too many of them for him to burn on his own.

Pan Xiangjie's panic was giving him heartburn. He had never imagined the breach would be his own son. He had been driven into a dead end—but he wouldn't go down without a fight.

"The reign of Yongyi…" Pan Xiangjie traced a finger down the entries in the accounts as he read them one by one. "The Hua Clan… The Han Clan…"

Everyone was there.

Pan Xiangjie nearly danced with joy. As long as everyone was implicated, his Pan Clan would not perish.

The rapid pounding of military boots erupted from the courtyard. Pan Xiangjie clutched the account book and rose, one hand on the chest for support. Unsteadily, he made his way to the door.

He came face to face with Han Cheng.

Faking composure, Pan Xiangjie swiftly covered the book with his sleeves. "Things have not yet come to a head and already the empress dowager can't contain herself? Abandoning the pawn to protect the rook is not a wise strategy. Xue Xiuzhuo and the noble clans will not suffer one

another to live. Even if you cast the Pan Clan aside today, the others will not escape unscathed."

Pan Xiangjie had spent his life feigning ignorance, cowering behind Hua Siqian and Wei Huaigu, falling to his knees in the imperial court at every turn to beg for mercy. Yet now here he stood, speaking with lucidity and eloquence.

Han Cheng gripped the hilt of his blade and revealed an inch of steel. "Your forfeit now will give everyone room to catch their breath. Everyone will remember your sacrifice. I swear your direct line of descendants will survive and have the chance to rise again."

As Pan Xiangjie watched the glint of the blade press toward him, he raised his voice. "Kill me today, and you'll merely hasten Xue Xiuzhuo's work! Once Dancheng has fallen, how long do you think Chuancheng can last?"

"Enough! The empress dowager always suspected you would leave yourself some bolt-hole to scuttle out through. The accounts are a mess, but you still remember them clearly, don't you?" Sweat had broken out on Han Cheng's forehead. He waved a hand to the men behind him. "Burn the courtyard!"

Pan Xiangjie gripped the door as his family wailed. In the pandemonium, he shouted, "I had Chengzhi make copies of these accounts long ago. Go on and burn them! Even if you kill me now, the evidence will still find its way into Xue Xiuzhuo's hands!"

"Pan Lin's treason is already established fact." Han Cheng drew his blade. "Didn't he secretly aid Yao Wenyu's escape? Yao Wenyu is now Shen Zechuan's strategist! The evidence of the Pan Clan's collusion with the rebels is conclusive; how credible are his words? Surely he is the spy Shen Zechuan left in Qudu!"

Caught amid the pushing and shoving, Pan Xiangjie fell to the ground. "You cast aside your pawns once they've served their purpose, and you eliminate those who've outlived their use! I was a willing minion for you people, yet this is how I meet my end! Han Cheng, if I die today, do you think you'll live much longer?!"

Han Cheng, under orders and carrying the authority token of the Eight Great Battalions, could wait no longer. The fire blazed behind him as he walked toward Pan Xiangjie and raised his blade for the kill.

But Qi Wei was faster. Instead of going around the walkway, he leapt over the ridge of the roof and swooped down from above, knocking Han Cheng to the ground.

Pan Xiangjie took the split-second reprieve to raise the account book overhead and yell toward the courtyard entrance. "Save me, Marshal Qi!"

In the thick of the scuffle, Han Cheng raised the Eight Great Battalions' authority token and shouted: "In Qudu, the capital's guards hold the highest authority! Qi Zhuyin's troops are forbidden from entering the city gates! How dare you obstruct my Eight Great Battalions from carrying out our duties?!"

A voice cracked out from beyond the gate: "I asked Marshal Qi to arrest the offending minister. I'm here with the warrant of arrest from the Ministry of Justice and the deployment order from the Ministry of War—why wouldn't I dare?" Xue Xiuzhuo flicked aside the hem of his robe and stepped over the threshold. "Put out the fire and carry out the arrests. Take Han Cheng as well!"

"I'm here on the empress dowager's orders," Han Cheng barked. "Who comes to arrest me?!"

The Eight Great Battalions soldiers in the courtyard drew their blades and took a threatening step toward Xue Xiuzhuo.

Qi Zhuyin, striding in at Xue Xiuzhuo's side, pushed the blades aside with the sheath of her saber. "The Eight Great Battalions are the capital's guards—the army of the Son of Heaven. The heir apparent herself sent me to assist in this case. Yet you elect to obey the empress dowager instead?"

Han Cheng had thought Pan Xiangjie was bluffing; he hardly expected Qi Zhuyin to actually show up. He had only dared to attack Pan Xiangjie ahead of Xue Xiuzhuo's arrival because he controlled the Eight Great Battalions, and thus had the ability to strong-arm the Grand Secretariat. But if he fought a real battle now, with Qi Zhuyin's men camped right outside the city, he would be at an obvious disadvantage.

Han Cheng deflated immediately. He hissed through clenched teeth, “Of course, I shall do as the heir apparent says.”

The soldiers of the Eight Great Battalions returned their blades to their sheaths and watched as Qi Zhuyin’s personal guards went into the manor to detain Pan Xiangjie and Han Cheng. The fire was quickly extinguished. Xue Xiuzhuo waved away the smoke and dust and reached for the few account books that had not fully burned.

When the report reached the empress dowager, she was taken aback. On hearing that Xue Xiuzhuo had taken the account books away, she couldn’t help but collapse onto the settee. A deep crease appeared between her brows as she spat, “Pan Xiangjie, that scoundrel!”

To save his own life, Pan Xiangjie had dragged them all down.

“Where is the heir apparent?” The empress dowager asked after she regained her composure. “Xue Xiuzhuo certainly is capable. Since he wishes to fight me to the death, let him find out for himself if his so-called destined Son of Heaven is truly cut out for the work!”

She yanked the prayer beads off her wrist and flung them into the burning copper basin, sending up a cloud of soot.

Within his own cell, Han Cheng shut his eyes and went to sleep. He turned his face to the wall and ignored everyone else, confident Xue Xiuzhuo wouldn’t dare touch him—at least not yet. In contrast, after his burst of courage, Pan Xiangjie had once again reverted to his old ways and sat sobbing on the other side of the interrogation table, hands clutching his sleeves.

“Yes, yes! I’ll account for it all.” Pan Xiangjie wiped his tears. “But first let me have something to eat. I’m starving, Yanqing.”

This cunning old coot was trying to stall for time. He meant to blackmail the empress dowager with his account books, and he was waiting for her to rescue him.

Although Liang Cuishan was an official who dealt primarily with taxation, he’d seen his fair share of such interrogations before; he knew

these old fellows were a pain to question. He, too, had stayed up all night. He took two sips of strong tea and, after receiving Xue Xiuzhuo's silent glance of approval, said, "It will be quite a while before a meal can be prepared, Your Excellency. Please take your time speaking."

There was no anger in the gaze Pan Xiangjie turned on Liang Cuishan. "Chongshen, you're well acquainted with Chengzhi, so you know me too." He patted his belly and pulled a long face. "I could never stand going hungry even at home. I can't think straight until I've eaten."

"How would I dare to ask Your Excellency to exhaust yourself?" Liang Cuishan set his tea aside. "You need only to answer a few questions. I audited the remaining grain in Dancheng yesterday. According to the reports, the granary is full. Tell me, did you purchase grain from elsewhere to pass off as your own crops before the Ministry of Revenue's latest review?"

"I'm not in charge of the granary in Dancheng." Pan Xiangjie spread his hands, the picture of innocence. He continued, distraught, "I'm in charge of the Ministry of Works! If you want the specifics, you'll have to ask the tax intendant of Dancheng or Pan Yi."

"I asked them long ago." Liang Cuishan flipped open an account book and showed it to Pan Xiangjie. "They've all confessed. You all sold your grain to Yan Heru. If Dancheng participated in this scheme, the other seven cities must have done the same, right?"

"I already told you I don't know anything about the Dancheng accounts. How would I know about the other seven cities?" Pan Xiangjie suspected Liang Cuishan was bluffing. "Well, since they've already confessed to it, Yanqing, just handle this by the book! Report it to the Grand Secretariat tomorrow so the Grand Secretary can take a look too."

"There will be other business to discuss during the morning court session tomorrow," Xue Xiuzhuo said. "We've already reported it."

For a moment, Pan Xiangjie couldn't tell whether Xue Xiuzhuo was telling the truth or not.

Liang Cuishan fished out the Ministry of Justice's writ from his sleeve. "Otherwise, why would we have invited Your Excellency here?

Naturally, we followed the proper procedures and obtained authorization from the Ministry of Justice."

Pan Xiangjie stared at the document for a long time.

Xue Xiuzhuo leaned in closer, fixing his eyes on Pan Xiangjie. "Your Excellency oversees the Ministry of Works. I noticed during the flooding case in the reign of Xiande that the dams along the Kailing River were well-repaired. Your Excellency is an honest man who does measurable good, someone who's willing to share the burdens of the common people. I am not here to target you. Chengzhi also fares well. He hasn't done anything to warrant execution. There's a small problem in the Pan Clan's accounts, but once we sort that out, there's room to maneuver."

His message was clear: If Pan Xiangjie continued to equivocate, he'd waste the inch of breathing room he had left.

Pan Xiangjie sniffled pitifully, even his beard drooping as he replied, "But I really don't know."

"Then it would appear Dancheng is the private land of the Pan Clan," Xue Xiuzhuo said, rising. "You've deceived the imperial court, colluded with Pan Lin in the Ministry of Revenue to appropriate the commoners' fields, and falsely reported the field taxes. As if that weren't enough, you conspired with Yan Heru of Hezhou to resell public grain for profit, leading to countless people dying of starvation. I see now that all of this was the work of your Pan Clan alone."

Realizing that Xue Xiuzhuo was serious, Pan Xiangjie jolted with fear. "Yanqing—"

"Submit an accurate copy of the account books and his confession statement to the Grand Secretariat," Xue Xiuzhuo said to a scribe behind him, no longer listening. "Corrupt men like this who pervert the course of justice deserve to have their properties seized and their entire clan executed."

"We haven't sorted through those account books yet!" Pan Xiangjie rose with him. His hands trembled as he pleaded, "Yanqing, Yanqing! Let's talk this over. I haven't told you everything!"

Xue Xiuzhuo turned back.

Left with no other recourse, Pan Xiangjie began, “Those accounts—”

The prison door behind Xue Xiuzhuo swung open. The scribe, startled, stood up. Xue Xiuzhuo looked toward the door and broke out in a cold sweat at the sight of an inner-palace eunuch.

The out-of-breath young eunuch knelt and shuffled forward on his knees, not daring to look an imperial court minister in the eyes. “Y-Your Excellency! The heir apparent suddenly f-fainted during morning court. The Grand Secretary has summoned the imperial physicians. Right now…”

One step shy.

Xue Xiuzhuo went cold, his hand clammy where it was clenched around the account book. Pan Xiangjie clamped his mouth shut and sat back down.

This timing. The empress dowager truly had an iron will!

Xue Xiuzhuo flung away the account book and squeezed his words out through clenched teeth. “We shall set off for the palace at once.”

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Chapter 225:
Adversary

FENGQUAN KNELT beside the bed and tasted every bowl of medicine before it passed Li Jianting's lips. Her face was pale, and her temples were covered in cold sweat as she lay trembling under a quilt that looked like it was crushing her. Faint whimpers and sobs escaped her throat with each urgent gasp for breath.

The imperial physicians didn't dare be careless with their diagnoses. They took her pulse again and again through the lowered bed curtains and wiped sweat off their brows as they rattled off prescriptions to their assistants waiting nearby.

Kong Qiu had faced this kind of crisis twice before with Hai Liangyi, but this was the first time he had waited at an imperial sickbed since taking charge of the Grand Secretariat. His hands, hidden within his sleeves, were slippery with nervous sweat. Even when it dripped into his eyes, he didn't dare blink.

If the heir apparent were to pass away now…

Kong Qiu couldn't bring himself to complete the thought. He closed his eyes with effort and remembered the rain during the public ditches incident. How much resolve had Hai Liangyi possessed back then to steel himself and give the necessary orders?

Teacher.

Unconsciously, Kong Qiu ground his teeth. If only he were still with them.

Kong Qiu was at a loss for words, overwhelmed by an intense sense of powerlessness as he listened to the intermittent moans coming from the heir apparent's bed.

The herbal decoction was spooned into her mouth. Li Jianting's eyes shifted under closed eyelids, as if she was trapped in a nightmare.

Fengquan knelt beside her all day. When the palace maids briefly retreated from Li Jianting's side, he plucked up the courage to gently brush her damp hair from her brow and watched the myriad expressions sweeping across her face.

The casualties of this showdown extended to the innocent bystanders caught in the crossfire. Whether or not the heir apparent survived this, the maids and eunuchs serving in her palace were already condemned to death. Fengquan had to find a way out, and quickly. He had unfinished business; Li Jianting must not die.

"Your Highness," he whispered. He was so close he could see the tiny hole in Li Jianting's earlobe. He braced himself. "Your Highness struggled free of the pleasure quarters and now stands a mere step away from holding the highest power in the land. If you give up now, everything you've done will be for nothing. Your Highness!"

But Li Jianting couldn't seem to hear him. Her fingers clutched the bedding. She lay in her palace bed, surrounded by fine silks and rich brocades, but her mind was trapped in the brothel, the foulest place in the world.

A whimper like a swallowed sob lingered in Li Jianting's throat—a plea for mercy she had made when she used to be beaten. The heavens had made a fool of her, giving her such an identity in the body of a girl. The jingling of earrings mingled with the din of tables and chairs toppling over. She had struggled among them countless times, dragged by her hair before those repulsive men.

Xiangyun was a good procuress: She knew how to make the most of her girls.

All those years ago, Ling Ting had been adopted by Xiangyun, but she was not special for it; Xiangyun had adopted many children like her. She would tip their little chins up, scrutinizing them carefully as she decided their future trajectory.

Ling Ting was pretty, but she had no natural charm. As Xiangyun looked her over, she was startled to find how much she hated the girl's eyes.

"You've the looks, but you're much too fierce," Xiangyun had informed her, tapping her pipe. "Might as well blind you. Only if they're

clouded over will those eyes inspire pity in the lords."

At twelve, she was small and scrawny. Xiangyun fed her and didn't actually blind her, and for that, Ling Ting was eternally grateful. Every day, she watched the men streaming in and out of Xiangyun Villa as she waited on the courtesans. She had no designated mistress. Instead, she spent all day pattering barefoot through the corridors, serving tea and water to all the courtesans, watching as they applied rouge, powder, and perfume.

Girls smelled so nice.

Ling Ting knelt by the door and laid her hands on the rug as she sneakily sniffed at the fragrance inside. She watched voluptuous bodies draped in silks and satins, and watched long, slender fingers pluck bracelets of gold and jade. She listened to those courtesans speaking in their sweet, delicate voices like the trills of orioles. They fascinated her and made her yearn for womanhood.

Wrapped in a shawl the colors of a vibrant sunset, Xiangyun swayed like a willow branch in the wind as she stopped beside Ling Ting. She had overindulged in wine, and a glowing sheen lit her face as she chuckled dreamily at Ling Ting's twitching nose and bent to cup the girl's face in her hands. "Little puppy. Here, let Mama put an earring on you."

A pearl dangling from a golden thread slid coldly along the contour of Ling Ting's earlobe before dropping onto the rug. Ling Ting stared at Xiangyun in a daze, but Xiangyun had already straightened, laughing as she walked off.

"Madam has an important guest today," a courtesan inside the room said as she tossed a vermilion hairpin into her jewelry box. She, too, appeared unsteady from too much wine. "The second son of the Prince of Libei."

A wave of giggles spilled out from inside.

Ling Ting knew nothing of the Prince of Libei or his son. She rescued the pearl earring and quietly tucked it into her palm.

Wine flowed in the brothel that evening. Ling Ting followed the maidservants in and saw Prince Chu reclining on the settee, already so drunk he was babbling nonsense. Several young masters from the noble clans had been invited as well, but Xiangyun ignored them all. She sat

demurely beside one man's chair, as prim as if she were a fine lady from a distinguished family.

Xiao Chiye was wearing a pewter-gray day robe, but his sober clothing did nothing to dampen his frivolous air. He seemed to have indulged in drink too, and sat with his arms draped over the chair as he threw dice with a young master beside him.

Ling Ting stood in attendance to pour wine for the honored guests half the night, by which time everyone was truly drunk. Li Jianheng pestered Xiangyun to drink cup after cup, while Xiao Chiye seemed to have played for hours to his heart's content, although he never once touched the courtesans at his side.

Reeking of wine, Li Jianheng pointed at Xiao Chiye, then turned to Xiangyun. "This is my…buddy! The son of the Prince…Prince of Libei… He's seen battle." He belched and giggled. "Ce'an is the real…deal."

Xiao Chiye burst into hearty laughter. His long fingers tossed the dice into a goblet as he said dismissively, "What good is the stinking battlefield compared to the comforts of this gentle haven? I'd rather sit here and pass away in drunken bliss."

Li Jianheng agreeably pushed Xiangyun toward him. Xiao Chiye fumbled his goblet; as he moved to keep it from falling, Xiangyun fell into the arms of another. They drank until they vomited. When they slumped over in sleep, the room was a scene of mayhem.

As she sat amid the chorus of snores, Ling Ting remembered the earring she still held in her palm. Spotting a corner of a mirror exposed in the inner room, she padded over. She stood on tiptoe and quietly held the earring up to her earlobe.

The pearl swung among the fine strands of her hair, glowing even in the dim light.

How pretty it was.

Ling Ting was lost in admiration when she heard the sound of cups overturned and alcohol spilling; startled, she retracted her hand. As she glanced over, she realized that the second young master from Libei was still awake.

Xiao Chiye didn't look at anyone. Though he sat in the middle of this dazzling opulence, he seemed distant from it all. He didn't head into any private room, nor did he accept the company of a courtesan. His arm rested on the chair as he gazed out the northeast window, his eyes sharp and sober.

Ling Ting retreated at once and wiped the sweat-stained earring clean. She kept it hidden close to her body and slept with it under her clothes. But not long after, Xiangyun remembered the gold-threaded pearl she had cast away.

She summoned Ling Ting. Sitting before her vanity, she turned and laughed. "Already twelve years old now, hmm?"

Li Jianting, trapped in her nightmares, threw up the herbal decoction that had been poured down her throat. The palace maids rushed over with a basin of hot water, and Fengquan rinsed a handkerchief in it to clean Li Jianting's face. Half conscious, Li Jianting only saw a blur. She felt the handkerchief brush her temples, warm droplets sliding down her cheeks like tears.

The heir apparent didn't wear earrings, but Ling Ting did.

Her agonized voice escaped between her teeth: "Livestock…"

Livestock! The earring swung in her ear as she fought, the pretty gold thread flowing along with her tears. She struggled to break free, but she was dragged back again and again. She cried and shouted, but her head was pinned down hard enough to bruise her forehead.

Let me go.

Ling Ting sobbed, raising a face wet with sweat and tears. She stared at the closed door as if she might still find some glimmer of hope there.

"Madam—!" Ling Ting shouted herself hoarse. "Spare me!"

Her only answer was the sharp sound of a slap.

Livestock!

Li Jianting's trembling fingers clutched the bedding until it creased. Her chest heaved violently. As her ears rang with those never-ending wails, she recognized herself for who she was.

She was livestock. From the moment she was born, she was no more than a sacrificial lamb, abandoned in the world's filthiest place. Trapped in that cramped and narrow room, she looked through the crack in the door and realized everything she had seen in the past was an illusion. None of those glamorous girls had escaped such a fate. They were all livestock, waiting to be slaughtered.

Ling Ting lunged forward and dug into the crack with her broken nails.

Why was she born a girl?

What a revolting body this was!

Ling Ting raked at the crack like a madwoman, howling through the streaks of blood. "Madam!" she spat. "Just kill me!"

If she could live.

If she could live like a human being.

"I…" Ling Ting pressed her forehead to the ground, crying and laughing at the earring brushing the ground. *I'm willing to kill myself*, she thought—to peel away that layer of skin and flesh and discard everything that came with being a woman. She would fight for what she wanted, rip her foes apart with her fangs, and take back what was rightfully hers.

If she was only given the slightest chance.

"Your Highness!" Fengquan cried as Li Jianting vomited again.

The imperial physicians in the outer room had risen to their feet. Kong Qiu staggered a few steps back, his heart dropping into his stomach. Cen Yu put a hand on his arm for support.

"If…" Kong Qiu couldn't bring himself to say it.

The hanging screen at the door lifted with a soft rustle. Xue Xiuzhuo's breathing was still ragged from his frantic journey here. When he heard the activity in the inner room, he understood what Kong Qiu had left unsaid. Yet he was no physician who could perform miraculous cures; he, too, was powerless.

So heavy was the atmosphere inside the hall that the officials scarcely dared to breathe. Palace maids went in and out with medicine. Fengquan

fed Li Jianting one spoonful after another. Li Jianting murmured incoherently. Fengquan couldn't hear what she was saying. He knelt beside the bed and lowered his ear closer to the heir's lips.

"All…" Li Jianting's lips quivered. "…for nothing."

Sweat stung Fengquan's eyes in the sepulchral dim of the lowered bed-curtain. He cupped a hand around his mouth and said quietly, "Your Highness is the true phoenix of this land. If you can pass through this, your misfortunes will surely turn into blessings!"

Li Jianting's urgent breathing hitched, as if she could finally hear what Fengquan was saying. Her whimpers and sobs gradually subsided. He spooned more herbal decoction past her lips, but she choked and coughed it out through her mouth and nose. The panicked palace maids prostrated themselves, sobbing. Fengquan ignored everyone else; he stayed by the bedside and fed the heir apparent her medicine.

Liang Cuishan, keeping watch in the prison, was burning with anxiety. Having finished an entire pot of tea, he stood outside, waiting for word to reach him. The stars overhead shone brilliantly, but he was too preoccupied to admire them or the moonlight in the courtyard—he had heard the storm of footsteps outside.

"What is this?!" Liang Cuishan couldn't help taking a few hasty steps forward when he saw the Eight Great Battalions streaming toward the prison.

The man at their head raised his authority token. "The warrant from the Ministry of Justice only gives you leave to arrest Pan Xiangjie, yet you people have abused your public position to avenge a private grudge! Our Commissioner Han is supervising this case on orders of the empress dowager. Release him at once!"

Liang Cuishan knew this was the point of no return. Release Han Cheng, and they would lose their grip on Pan Xiangjie and Pan Lin too. He gritted his teeth, squared his shoulders, and raised his chin. "I am here on the orders of the heir apparent and the Grand Secretary to investigate Han Cheng. Without a writ from the heir apparent and Grand Secretary themselves, I will not be releasing him or anyone!"

The soldier pressed a few steps closer. “The heir apparent? The one who rules the world is the empress dowager!”

Laing Cuishan looked at him in horror. The Eight Great Battalions bore down on him menacingly, and he stepped back. “What are you trying to do…?”

“Spies from Zhongbo have infiltrated Qudu. We’ve sealed the city gates to conduct a thorough search.” The man returned his token to his belt. “Search the prison!”

Every man from the Eight Great Battalions was armed; clearly, this was no mere search. Liang Cuishan understood in an instant. The Dancheng case had pushed the empress dowager into such a corner that she had resorted to desperate measures—she meant to stamp them out once and for all.

“I-I am an appointed official of the imperial court…” Liang Cuishan retreated one step and then another in the face of those blades.

The officials in charge of hearing the case fell back with him. They were all civil officials, unused to holding their own against such intimidation. Haunted by the old nightmare of the incident at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds, they sensed that a fierce storm was brewing.

“Marshal Qi remains in Qudu, yet you dare act in flagrant contempt of the law!” Liang Cuishan, having retreated to the entrance of the prison, bluffed: “Guards of Qidong, show yourselves!”

The men from Eight Great Battalions promptly drew their swords and looked around with equal parts anxiety and skepticism. Qi Zhuyin’s personal guards were all battle-hardened, not to mention the thousands of Qidong Garrison soldiers currently stationed outside the city. The Eight Great Battalions had hoped to act under cover of night while the heir apparent was ill. If they could kill these court officials now under the pretext of exterminating spies from Zhongbo, then once day broke, not even the Qidong Garrison Troops charging into the city would be able to turn the tide.

Liang Cuishan took their momentary hesitation as his chance to dart into the prison, where he secured the chain around the door. He pushed the officials back behind him; panicked, everyone fled further inside.

The Eight Great Battalion's blades twisted their way through the chain, the door clanging with the force of their blows. A soldier sneered through the door, "Dogshit official! You think you're safe behind a locked door? Smoke them out!"

From the innermost reaches of the prison, Pan Xiangjie shrieked, "Stop! Don't set any fires! Commissioner Han is still in here. You can't burn us with them!"

Liang Cuishan raised his oil lamp high. "No one would miss these two corrupt officials! But the flames will surely attract the attention of the garrison troops outside the city. Once they breach the gates, it will be you rebels who die on their swords!"

The soldier outside withdrew his blade from the crack, a look of uncertainty crossing his face. The empress dowager had ordered them not to alert the Qidong Garrison Troops outside the city. He estimated the hour. The last he knew, the heir apparent's life was hanging by a thread. Since there was still no news from the palace, the heir apparent must be dead as a doornail. Mind thus set at ease, his expression brightened slightly.

"Lord Liang." As he spoke, he raised a hand to motion for the squad behind him to circle around the walls. "You serve in the Ministry of Revenue. You watch silver rolling in and out all day long, yet you live in a ramshackle old courtyard. Why suffer like this? Take this opportunity to come over where the grass is greener and your future is bright."

Liang Cuishan's heart was pounding from nerves, but he was happy to stall for time. "I make a modest salary. I'm content to live in such a courtyard."

"You can only relax in the shade under the cover of a great tree." This soldier was one of Han Cheng's trusted aides. He said unhurriedly, pacing before the door, "A storm is brewing. How many days of peace does Qudu have left? Pledge yourself to a good master sooner rather than later, and you can continue to serve the imperial court."

"You and I walk different paths. The Son of Heaven is the one to whom we both pledged our loyalty. Our Great Zhou is the empire of the Li family. For someone else to claim the throne would be a deviation from morals and virtues." The oil lamp in Liang Cuishan's hand guttered as it reached the last of its fuel. "I'd advise you to lay down your blade and

repent. It's not too late to see the errors of your ways. When the rightful heir ascends the throne, she will remember your act of service."

The man tutted. "In that case, you can go to hell with her!"

Behind him, Liang Cuishan heard the small grated window on the wall burst open. The Eight Great Battalion soldiers had thrown a smoldering bundle of straw inside. Smoke instantly filled the prison. The officials covered their mouths with their sleeves as they coughed until tears sprang into their eyes.

Pan Xiangjie was more certain than ever that the empress dowager intended to kill him. The shackles on his hands rattled as he gripped the bars and yelled through the coughing men around him. "Chongshen, Chongshen! Open—open the door!"

Han Cheng had startled awake in the commotion. He knocked over the teapot on the table and wet his sleeves to cover his nose and mouth.

The smoke was so suffocating that Liang Cuishan could barely keep on his feet. The officials behind him stumbled around, knocking into the table and chairs. After only a few moments, they couldn't bear it anymore and stepped onto the table, gripping the windowsill to get a breath of fresh air. The moment their heads popped into sight, the Eight Great Battalions soldiers waiting outside stabbed them.

"Lord Liang! You were only promoted up the ranks due to your role in the public ditches case," the soldier called from outside. "Shen Zechuan was the liaison from the Embroidered Uniform Guard delegated to work with the Ministry of Revenue back then! How are you not a spy Zhongbo has planted in Qudu? Vice Minister Pan asked you to investigate the case, so you colluded with Xue Yanqing to tamper with the account books and frame your superior. You hoped to cause chaos in Qudu, did you not?!"

It was true Shen Zechuan had recommended Liang Cuishan for promotion—but Liang Cuishan had no involvement whatsoever with Zhongbo. In the course of his duties, he'd been sent to both Juexi and Hezhou, and he had gone by the book every time. He had never exchanged so much as a single letter with Shen Zechuan. Faced with such accusations, he promptly rebuffed the soldier: "Slander!"

The smoke was choking them. Pan Xiangjie slammed against the door, pleading as he coughed, “Chongsh-shen, open the door, quick!”

It wasn’t just Pan Xiangjie; the officials with Liang Cuishan were gasping for breath too. They’d been forced into a corner, a cliff in front and wolves behind. If nothing changed, they would all suffocate here.

Several wardens yanked at the chains securing the door. Unable to stop them, Liang Cuishan watched in horror as the prison door swung open and the officials around him scrambled over themselves to flee. He stumbled as they barreled past him, but before he could call out, he heard their blood-curdling screams from outside. The Eight Great Battalions soldiers had beheaded them on the spot.

“Mad!” Liang Cuishan supported himself against the wall and covered his face with his hands. “You’ve all gone mad!”

A heavy blow struck his back as someone kicked him to the ground.

Han Cheng spat on Liang Cuishan before covering his nose and mouth again. He said, voice muffled, “It’s your rebellious horde who will be purged tonight!”

The branches that had just begun to sprout new leaves in the courtyard rustled in the wind, which picked up the scattered pages of the account books and sent them flying in the air. Han Cheng’s black boots stomped on a brush on the ground, snapping it. Amid the stench of smoke and blood, he kicked away a corpse at his feet and swatted at the dust and soot staining his robe.

Liang Cuishan was led out with blades pressed to his neck. His black gauze official’s hat had been lost in the scuffle, and his hair was loose and disheveled. “Even if the empress dowager kills the heir, the empire will not belong to her.” He panted heavily. “You’re all a pack of scheming traitors! How can you destroy the hundred-year legacy of our Li Clan’s empire—”

He faltered, too overwhelmed with grief and sorrow to continue. He had accepted that he would meet his maker today.

A sharp whistle pierced the chaos.

As dawn broke over the horizon, the golden glazed tiles of Qudu’s palace gleamed in the light. Qi Zhuyin galloped in and urged her horse to

rear, breaking open the gates of the prison's courtyard. She raised the token in her hand.

"I'm here on the orders of the heir apparent to supervise the capital guard's search of the city." Her eyes found Han Cheng as her horse's hooves slammed back onto the ground.

"The heir's life is in peril." Han Cheng forced a disbelieving smile. "How could she give any orders? I know the grand marshal is anxious to save them, but that doesn't excuse falsifying the heir apparent's words."

Qi Zhuyin pulled the deployment order from within her sleeve and tossed it at Han Cheng. "The heir's own writ—do you recognize it?"

Han Cheng looked at the document. The red-inked words skewed across the page—it was clearly an order approved by someone guiding the heir apparent's hand. He fell silent for a moment, his mind spinning as he analyzed the situation. The city gates had been sealed, and the Eight Great Battalions still had twenty thousand men inside the walls. Qi Zhuyin had traveled light into the capital, with only two thousand soldiers from the garrison troops behind her.

If he moved swiftly, they still had a chance of victory.

"Before I set off," Qi Zhuyin said, her hair ornament with its string of five pearls swaying as she leaned down, "I specifically instructed my old man to send someone to fetch me if I don't return in a fortnight."

Han Cheng crushed the deployment order in his hand and looked Qi Zhuyin square in the eyes. "I remember you said the same thing at the Nanlin Hunting Grounds."

"My head belongs to more than me." Qi Zhuyin laughed. "It pays to have a little caution."

"The empress dowager once stood against a chorus of dissenting voices to grant the marshal's wish." Han Cheng smiled thinly and stuffed the deployment order into his sleeve. "How could she have thought it would end like this? Oh well."

Liang Cuishan slumped to the ground. He picked up his official's hat and bowed to Qi Zhuyin. "Thanks be to Marshal Qi's foresight; otherwise, it would have been a bloodbath here today."

Qi Zhuyin said nothing as she watched Han Cheng retreat. Only when the Eight Great Battalions' last man had withdrawn from the courtyard did she move her hand from the hilt of Banisher.

What foresight did she have? She had only been bluffing to scare Han Cheng.

Qi Zhuyin's heart sank a little at the thought. A twenty-thousand-strong capital guard was indeed a thorny issue. The empress dowager had only acted so boldly today because she'd been sure her adversary wouldn't dare gamble with Li Jianting's life.

Almost the moment Li Jianting's breathing stabilized, the eunuchs and maidservants in her service were rounded up and taken to prison. The poisoning of the heir to the throne was no trivial matter. For all the safety precautions Xue Xiuzhuo had put in place, he couldn't guard against the empress dowager. The inner palace was too far beyond his reach.

In the hall outside, Kong Qiu turned to him. "These eunuchs are all short-sighted, narrow-minded creatures. All it takes is for them to suffer the least indignity from their master, and with the proper instigation, they'll plot against even the Son of Heaven! This incident must be thoroughly investigated. Once they've confessed, the culprit must be dealt the most severe punishment!"

As the Minister of Justice, Kong Qiu had never gotten along with Pan Rugui and the eunuchs he oversaw. After being additionally influenced by the opinions of Hai Liangyi, he now abhorred eunuchs to the core. He finished the strong tea in his cup and continued, "The Pan Clan's guilt in the Dancheng case is undeniable. Once the fields have been resurveyed, we'll comb the Six Ministries and see exactly how many servants of the empire are implicated in this!"

Xue Xiuzhuo's spirits lifted. He understood this was Kong Qiu's bid to settle the score once and for all with the noble clans, and he nodded his head in agreement.

Beside them, Cen Yu seemed as if he had something to say. But in the end, he said not a word.

The curtain had scarcely fallen on the skirmish in Qudu when Shen Zechuan received news of it all the way in Duanzhou.

The sun was bright and high. Ding Tao and Li Xiong sat on the covered walkway having a match: They were using clean fruit pits as skipping stones across puddles in the courtyard. Fei Sheng's hands were occupied with a bowl of medicine, so Qiao Tianya was the one who hoisted the two up by the backs of their collars.

Ding Tao covered his head with his arms. "We'll pick them up right away!"

"I've been sitting here watching you for half a day." Qiao Tianya flicked the boy's forehead. "Aren't you already eighteen, Tao-er? Why do you act like you aren't even weaned yet?"

Ding Tao frowned at the astringency of the fruit peel in his mouth. He replied self-righteously, "None of you ever send me on assignments. What else do I have to do besides sit here and munch on seeds?"

"Munch on seeds," Li Xiong parroted.

Qiao Tianya gave each of them a kick in the rear and ordered them to pick up the pits. As he stood watching from the walkway, a guard came up beside him and relayed a message in his ear. Qiao Tianya peered through the doorway. Shen Zechuan was drinking his medicine and chatting with Yao Wenyu, so Qiao Tianya nodded and gave the go-ahead.

Not long after, Yan Heru appeared, radiating glee. His attire was never in the same style, but every outfit featured embroidery of ingots and copper coins, which shone so brightly he looked like a peacock striding through the courtyard with its head held high.

"Commander Qiao! Congratulations on your promotion." Yan Heru hugged his golden abacus to his chest as he trotted up the steps. Craning his neck, he peered inside and whispered, "How is His Lordship today?"

Fei Sheng, who happened to step out with the empty bowl at just that moment, regarded Yan Heru with cool detachment. "Go on inside and you'll find out, won't you? Hurry up. His Lordship is waiting."

Yan Heru promptly flashed his dimples. As he climbed the rest of the stairs, he said, "Of course I gotta go in. One day away and I miss him so

much." He smiled amiably at Fei Sheng, squared his shoulders, and shuffled past him at a safe distance before darting inside.

"Your Lordship!" Yan Heru called warmly. "I've been looking forward—"

Shen Zechuan glanced at Yan Heru from where he stood by the window, his gaze so frosty Yan Heru immediately swallowed his words. Yan Heru quietly drew his foot back and asked timidly, "Um. Greetings? Your Lordship?"

Yao Wenyu sipped his tea at the low table, not sparing him so much as a glance.

Shen Zechuan lifted his folding fan and pointed it toward a chair. "Sit."

How would Yan Heru dare to come in and sit when he was here to apologize and admit the error of his ways? He pulled out a chair and gestured eagerly for Shen Zechuan to take his seat first.

It was midday. A bird perched among the branches, chirping now and then. At this time of year, the temperature was warm and the air was dry—perfect for a nap. Shen Zechuan ignored Yan Heru's attempts to ingratiate himself and remained by the window, limned by the light. The faint breeze brushed his cheeks, sending his agate earring swaying like the gentle ripples of waves under the spring sun.

Yan Heru saw nothing beautiful about this scene; all he registered was the terrifying expression in the prefectural governor's eyes and his deliberate silence, so intimidating he could barely stay steady on his feet.

A man like Shen Zechuan…

Yan Heru tried his best to distract himself while grousing silently. Once the fear of Shen Zechuan had taken root, one would find his beauty a blade. The more one looked at him, the more afraid one became… A bizarre business.

"I hear Qudu is investigating the fields in Dancheng," Shen Zechuan began, the pads of his fingers resting against his folding fan. "Have you heard any news of this?"

Yan Heru had come prepared. He knew the prefectural governor was waiting for him to own up to his role in this, so he wasted no time. “Sure I do. How would I dare pretend otherwise? Your Lordship, the granaries in the eight cities are a bluff. The nobles long since asked me to sell their grain to Mount Luo and Fanzhou. The bandits were eager to buy it.” At this point, he paused meekly, as if puzzled. “Didn’t Cai Yu tell you about this?”

Of course Cai Yu hadn’t said a word. Cai Yu had been Yan Heru’s man on the ground in Chazhou. He’d merely done the legwork; how would he know the source of the grain he handled from year to year? Yan Heru had never revealed a word of this to the bandit chief. He’d merely told him the shipments were grain from Hezhou’s granary. All Cai Yu wanted was money, so he’d never dug deeper.

Can’t go wrong laying blame on the dead! Yan Heru’s eyes curved in a smile. No matter how powerful Shen Zechuan was, he couldn’t bring Cai Yu back to interrogate him.

“This was all my mistake. I should have explained it to Your Lordship myself,” Yan Heru added with convincing sincerity. “Please punish me for my oversight, Your Lordship. I didn’t think it mattered.”

Presented that way, Yan Heru’s silence on the topic seemed reasonable enough. He and Shen Zechuan were doing business in the east now. They wouldn’t be reselling any government grain in the future, so in theory, they could simply turn the page. But his excuses fell apart the second one took a closer look. The grain prices Shen Zechuan had been undercutting in Zhongbo were the same ones Yan Heru had deliberately raised. Since the migrants had fled into Zhongbo from the eight cities, Shen Zechuan had had to estimate the remaining stock of the eight cities before he could compete in a pricing war with them.

Shen Zechuan turned back to look out of the window again, contemplative. “Because you emptied the granaries of the eight cities, the matter of the stolen commoners’ fields will go unresolved this year. Qudu and the eight cities have no grain of their own and must requisition it from Juexi, Hezhou, and Huaizhou. Turns out you’ve held the lives of the nobles in your hands all along.”

To Yan Heru’s ears, it sounded like Shen Zechuan was praising him —but he dared not answer rashly. Shen Zechuan was a cunning man. Who

knew if he was merely waiting for Yan Heru to fall into his trap? Yan Heru replied cautiously, "I've turned over a new leaf after throwing in with Your Lordship. I'm not in that business anymore, and they've likely forgotten about me already."

"Unlike in the eight cities, you were able to get your hands on grain from Juexi while hiding it from Jiang Qingshan. In a way, this was all thanks to Xi Hongxuan." A bug landed on the window ledge. Shen Zechuan prodded it with his fan and watched it dodge here and there as he continued. "It just occurred to me recently: Xi Hongxuan was reselling public grain too. If you two had run into each other in Juexi, how would he have suffered you to live?"

Xi Hongxuan had been the lawful son of a noble clan, with his vaults of silver standing as assurance—it was natural that he'd been popular in official circles. Conversely, it must have been terribly difficult for Yan Heru to get a foothold in Juexi; he had been forced to carve out an unconventional path just to have a fighting chance. Shen Zechuan knew from reviewing the list of names from the brokerage in Dunzhou that the officials Yan Heru had bribed were all crooked men who had previously resold public grain and copper ore to Xi Hongxuan. With this leverage against them in hand, Yan Heru had followed in Xi Hongxuan's footsteps and scavenged whatever he left behind. When even that wasn't enough to fill his stomach, he had dipped his fingers into the eight cities' granaries.

"The business in the eight cities was just luck." Yan Heru grinned. "That fat slob Xi Hongxuan had such a tight hold over Juexi thanks to those silver vaults of his—I had no choice but to seek opportunities elsewhere."

The Eight Great Clans couldn't stand for any one of them to have an advantage over the others; they would never have let Xi Hongxuan claim the full sum of the grain profits for himself. The Xi Clan was already rich enough.

The Yan Clan of Hezhou, however, was just the opposite. Yan Heru was young, with no family connections in the imperial court—he should have been easy for the noble clans to push around. But this young man was much too slippery. He had made a staggering fortune as an intermediary, then thrown a pittance of profit that was hardly worth accounting for back

to the noble clans. Yet the noble clans still thought they had gotten a good deal.

The room was quiet while Yan Heru spoke. He seemed not to notice the murderous undercurrent beneath Shen Zechuan's silence as he continued, hands folded primly behind his back, "At the end of the day, His Lordship is happy with the result, yes? Xue Xiuzhuo is out for blood with his plan to resurvey the eight cities' fields. I don't even have to touch my abacus to calculate that the noble clans will never be able to make up the deficit in field taxes. It'll be every man for himself once they're backed into a corner, and when the time comes, Your Lordship will be able to take Qudu without lifting a finger."

Shen Zechuan looked over his shoulder at Yan Heru. Softly, he said, "I guess I ought to thank you."

Yan Heru's hair stood on end. His dimples faded as he met Shen Zechuan's eyes; only after a long pause did he manage, "I'm just saying."

"Is that all?" Shen Zechuan asked.

Yan Heru would have laughed out loud if he dared. *I knew it*. Shen Zechuan would definitely seize this opportunity to wring even more money out of him.

Damn it, Yan Heru fumed.

How much silver had Shen Zechuan fleeced him of since the seventh month last year? Sure, the trade route was valuable—but Yan Heru had his eyes set on farther horizons. He knew he could make more. Leaving aside the shady grain business Shen Zechuan had pulled the plug on, the grain he'd been forced to transport to Qidong this year was the real drain. Then there was the new port they were building now in Liuzhou—Shen Zechuan was really trying to rip him off!

But he, too, had a way to push back.

"That reminds me! I heard Er-ye was looking for Master Yideng last year. What a coincidence! My men picked him up in Hezhou just last month. That's why I rushed over here in a hurry—to make sure Er-ye got the news." Yan Heru flicked the beads on his golden abacus. "So, does Your Lordship want him?"

Shen Zechuan looked up at Yan Heru and, very softly, began to chuckle.

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Chapter 226:
Magnanimity

THE ARMORED CAVALRYMEN drilling on Second Sand Camp's training grounds were drenched in sweat under the scorching sun. Even so, a chill ran down everyone's spines at the twang of the Conqueror Bow. Three arrows struck the target one after another, the dull, heavy thuds reverberating through the training grounds. Xiao Chiye lowered the bow and nocked another arrow.

"Master, the new sabers you ordered have arrived." Chen Yang stood a little aside, holding the quiver for Xiao Chiye. "I checked the shipment with Wu Ziyu this morning; they're all quality blades forged by the military craftsmen back home."

Xiao Chiye raised his arm, eyes fixed on the target. The arrow struck the bullseye with another *thud*.

Chen Yang held out a fresh arrow. He waited for Xiao Chiye to empty the entire quiver before passing him a towel. The sun blazed overhead. Xiao Chiye wiped his sweat. "Is he here?"

Chen Yang looked back toward the entrance of the camp. "Should be by now."

It was midday. Second Sand Camp's ditches were overflowing with snowmelt. The spring heat shimmered in waves over the boundless expanse of withered yellow grassland that stretched away outside the boundary of the camp. Propping himself against a wall, Gu Jin peered out at the haze of sand hovering on the horizon.

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“Open the gate!” A sentry stationed above the wall called down, “General Guo is here!”

The gate lifted, and Guo Weili advanced with the armored cavalry in tow. He reined in his horse and removed his helmet, then ran a hand through his sweat-soaked hair as he waited for the bridge to lower over the moat around the camp.

The falcons with Guo Weili’s troops circled the sky near the entrance of the camp, hesitant to land. Inside, a commotion broke out in the mews. Meng perched at the top of the watchtower, staring down at the new arrivals.

A change came over the atmosphere of the camp. The soldiers from the Imperial Army, who had been squatting by the wall in the shade, rose to watch the camp gate open with myriad expressions. Gu Jin stood perfectly still and locked eyes with Guo Weili, neither of them willing to look away first.

It was common knowledge that Guo Weili and Xiao Chiye didn’t get along. Guo Weili’s framing of Gu Jin in Tudalung Banner was the dagger that lay between them. To make matters worse, he had repeatedly clashed with the Imperial Army when he commanded Third Sand Camp. Tensions were high between them. No one had expected Xiao Jiming would place Guo Weili under Xiao Chiye’s command with one deployment order.

Wu Ziyu emerged from his tent but kept well clear, not wishing to get caught in the crossfire.

Xiao Chiye was now Guo Weili’s commanding general; whether or not Guo Weili stepped onto the battlefield was now entirely at Xiao Chiye’s discretion. Gu Jin was Xiao Chiye’s close personal guard; it was impossible to simply let bygones be bygones. Perhaps Xiao Chiye would make life difficult for Guo Weili, or even take him out of the main combat force entirely. Neither choice would bode well for a Second Sand Camp that had only just been rebuilt after Hassen’s attack.

Once the bridge was lowered, Guo Weili urged his horse across and led his squad into Second Sand Camp. Gu Jin came halfway down the steps, then stood smack in the center of the path and watched them enter.

Xiao Chiye didn't turn. He nocked the arrow he had retrieved onto the bowstring and concentrated his attention on the target.

Thwack!

Guo Weili, helmet tucked under one arm, heard the thud and saw the Conqueror Bow glinting under the sunlight. After a moment, he dismounted.

Chen Yang stepped forward to receive him with a group of Second Sand Camp's men. Guo Weili handed over his token, and Chen Yang examined it before saying, "Your original squad will be disbanded and reassigned. They can head to the tent at the east end of the camp to register. We'll distribute them to fill the open spots."

"Hassen attacked a few days ago," Guo Weili said. "The wall on the eastern side of Third Sand Camp has completely collapsed. Better send a report home at the next opportunity—it needs repairs as soon as possible."

"Did Hassen come with catapults?" Chen Yang tucked his record book under his arm. When Guo Weili nodded, he looked over at the Imperial Army milling nearby and called, "Go get Meng Rui! Tell him to fetch the craftsmen." He turned back to Guo Weili. "I'll arrange for craftsmen to head down to Third Sand Camp now. Why don't you go on ahead to report to Er-ye."

Guo Weili pressed the tip of his tongue to a chipped canine tooth and turned to face Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye paid him no mind. He seemed wholly focused on his archery drills, each shot practically punching through the target.

The weather in Libei this year was unusually warm. It was only the middle of the third month, yet it was as hot as the fourth or fifth month on the battlegrounds. Guo Weili was still wearing his armor; under the scorching sun, he roasted until sweat poured off him. His undergarments were so damp he could have wrung water out of them; they stuck to his body, working hand in hand with the heat to put him in a foul mood.

Guo Weili wiped a hand over his face and shouted at the top of his lungs, "Guo Weili of Third Sand Camp is here to report to Er-ye!"

Xiao Chiye paused, the last arrow still on the string.

"Four days ago, Hassen launched a surprise assault on Third Sand Camp. We lost our right flank in the battle, and the eastern side of Third Sand Camp suffered serious damage." Guo Weili stepped back. "General Zuo asked me to relay this report."

He didn't wait for Xiao Chiye's response before turning to leave.

If Xiao Chiye intended to make things difficult for him, well then, Guo Weili was resigned to his fate. What more was there to say; as long as he could—

An arrow screamed past his head, an icy sharpness he clearly felt graze his ear, and nailed itself into a pillar a few steps away. Had Guo Weili been walking any faster, it would've pierced his skull.

Damn him!

Guo Weili whipped around, livid. "If Er-ye wants to kill me, just say it outright!"

Xiao Chiye's expression was frigid as he let the Conqueror Bow drop to his side. "So you know I want to kill you? Guo Weili, when Gu Jin escorted the military provisions to the front lines last year, he encountered an ambush near Tudalung Banner. He had to traverse the marshland to reach Base Camp. But when he finally made his way back, you covered for the failings of the patrols under your command and instead bound and punished him. You stripped him of his rank and accused him of colluding with the Biansha Horsemen. So tell me, based on this, should I kill you or not?"

Gu Jin accepted the armguard one of his men handed him and descended the steps.

Guo Weili had framed Gu Jin because he saw Xiao Chiye as Xiao Jiming's competition, and everyone knew it. But in laying it out in the open like this, it was clear Xiao Chiye meant to deal with him in his own way.

Guo Weili flung his helmet away. "That's right. I did. Kill me or punish—"

Gu Jin grabbed Guo Weili's collar from behind. The instant Guo Weili turned back, Gu Jin threw a punch that knocked him to the ground. It was such a hard blow that Guo Weili felt the remaining half of his canine loosening. He spat bloody froth and shouted, "Fuck!"

But Gu Jin didn't wait for him to stand up. He kicked him in the chest. Guo Weili was sent sprawling, his face smeared with yellow sand. He was still scrubbing grit out of his eyes when Gu Jin yanked him up and dropped him again with an elbow to the face.

Guo Weili felt as if his cheeks would split from the blows, but not once did he raise a hand to fight back. He let Gu Jin pummel him until the copper tang of blood coated every crevice of his mouth. Gu Jin waited until Guo Weili was doubled over on the ground, wheezing, before he tossed the armguard down to clang against the ground. "You owed me that," he said. Calming his slightly labored breathing, he continued, "And now you've repaid it."

Not only was Guo Weili stunned, even Wu Ziyu, still standing a distance away, was struck dumb.

Guo Weili pushed himself up from the ground and spat out the blood in his mouth. He staggered to his feet. When Chen Yang tossed his helmet to him, Guo Weili was still a little lost.

That's it?

But he had almost lashed Gu Jin to death.

Gu Jin took a few steps back. "The grudge between you and me is written off today. Anything we have to say to each other should be laid out in the open. You're Er-ye's soldier, and I'm his guard. When we step out of Second Sand Camp after this, you and I are brothers who have each other's back. The day this war ends, we go our separate ways."

The scene everyone had expected did not materialize. Libei's morale was already low. Gu Jin was Xiao Chiye's guard; he didn't want Xiao Chiye to lose the hearts of Third Sand Camp's soldiers on account of the wrongs done to him. Xiao Chiye had given Gu Jin permission to resolve the matter as he deemed fit. And Gu Jin had chosen to handle it this way because he was an honorable man who could not and would not play dirty.

Guo Weili had thought he'd end up badly injured today, if not dead. Gu Jin's magnanimity surprised him. He felt smaller now, standing before Gu Jin. He rubbed at the bruises on his face, and despite his reluctance to admit defeat, he couldn't help being a little impressed. He who could tolerate shame and endure humiliation was a man of real character.

Guo Weili showed his boldness in drinking and in battle. He saw himself as a man among men, and wouldn't easily concede to anyone. Despite the extraordinary humiliation Gu Jin had suffered at Tudalung Banner, he'd been willing to set it aside today to dispel the awkwardness between both parties. He had not only saved Guo Weili from debilitating punishment, he had also won Third Sand Camp's heart on Xiao Chiye's behalf. Gu Jin represented Xiao Chiye, and his actions were a reflection of his master. Whether on a personal or official level, Guo Weili had to hand it to him for resolving the conflict so neatly.

Xiao Chiye raised an arm for Meng to perch. Standing in the wind, he recalled the last words his old man had said. Gu Jin had gone to such lengths today to smooth the path ahead for Xiao Chiye. It was a message he was sending to everyone on the front line:

The second master was a tolerant man; he didn't hold grudges.

Night descended. Guo Weili sat by the campfire and roasted his field rations, his face decorated purple and blue. Wu Ziyu sat across from him, rice bowl in hand. Guo Weili cast him a glance but said nothing.

"There's fresh food in the camp." Wu Ziyu snatched Guo Weili's field rations away. "Go get some. Why are you squatting here gnawing on this stuff?"

Guo Weili clenched his now-empty hands at his sides and said testily, "Mind your own fucking business."

"Don't tell me you're embarrassed." Wu Ziyu stuffed two spoonfuls of rice into his mouth. "Gu Jin already said it's water under the bridge."

Guo Weili picked up a piece of firewood and stoked the flames. On the other side of the fire pit, the Imperial Army was having a whale of a time laughing and joking; those military ruffians were the same as ever.

After a moment of silence, Guo Weili asked, "Er-ye vanquished the Duanzhou Scorpions at the Chashi Sinkhole?"

"Sure did. While outnumbered too." Wu Ziyu held up a few fingers to indicate the numbers they'd been up against.

Guo Weili scoffed. “I bet the main force was his pet Imperial Army, huh?”

“Bullshit. How many Imperial Army soldiers do you think went with him?” Wu Ziyu had never gotten along with Guo Weili; he’d been rubbed the wrong way by this man too many times. “Get over yourself, will you? What part of the second master doesn’t cut it? He was the one who took back Third Sand Camp and cut down Huhelu, the nemesis you’d been fighting half your life. And now he’s chopped off the head of the Scorpions in Duanzhou. Even after your mistreatment of Gu Jin, he’s still willing to put you to use—I’d call that magnanimity. Get outta here with your ungrateful fucking attitude!”

Guo Weili poked the flames until they spat sparks. He lifted the charred stick and pointed at Wu Ziyu.

Wu Ziyu had no fear of Guo Weili. Back when he’d merely been in the supply squadron, he’d been overshadowed at every turn. He’d had no opportunity to step onto the battlefield, and his stagnant career had turned him into a good-for-nothing. But it was different now. He was the one who had seized back Duanzhou. Although credit went to Xiao Chiye’s diversionary tactic of luring most of the enemy away from their base, Wu Ziyu had fought the actual battle to reclaim the city, regardless of the number of men he’d deployed.

“What victorious battles have we fought this year? You’ve seen it yourself, butting heads with Hassen. Our armored cavalry is falling behind even the Bianjun Commandery Garrison Troops at First Sand Camp right now.” Wu Ziyu set down his chopsticks. “Can you beat the Scorpions in battle? No, you can’t. Can Zhao Hui? He can’t either. So why not serve under Er-ye’s command?”

“Am I not doing it right now?” Guo Weili was a hot-tempered man with a blunt vocabulary. “How else do you want me to serve him? By bunking down in the shadow of his ass? Damn it all, how did the armored cavalry dodge those iron hammers, anyway?”

“It was the stuff of legend.” Wu Ziyu pushed to his feet and gave him a thumbs-up. “But you can damn well go figure it out for yourself.”

Guo Weili watched Wu Ziyu walk away. It wasn’t until he was engulfed by the evening darkness that Guo Weili bolted to his feet and

cursed, “What the hell! My rations!”

But Wu Ziyu was long gone.

Xiao Chiye examined the newly delivered blades by candlelight. The Libei Armored Cavalry needed to adapt to these longer and thinner weapons. He arranged formations on the sand table and turned what he’d experienced in the Chashi Sinkhole over and over in his mind.

When Chen Yang and Gu Jin entered the tent, Xiao Chiye’s nose caught the aroma of milk.

“Master, there was a letter from the prefectural governor with the supply wagons.” Chen Yang set the letter from Duanzhou on a small table nearby. “The Mount Luo stables are beginning to take shape, and the road through Zhongbo is coming along so quickly it should be ready for use by the end of the fourth month.”

Those roads were built on piles and piles of Shen Zechuan’s silver; how could it not be quick?

At this thought, Xiao Chiye remembered Qudu. He returned the blades to their sheaths and opened Shen Zechuan’s letter between sips of milk tea.

“Master Yideng is in Hezhou…” Xiao Chiye hesitated for a moment before looking at Gu Jin. “What is Master Yideng doing in Hezhou?”

Gu Jin, carrying a fresh robe for Xiao Chiye draped over one arm, thought for a moment and shook his head. “Why would Master Yideng go to Hezhou? It was during his early years in Hezhou that he joined the monastery and became a monk. In recent years, he’s only been willing to roam in and around Libei.”

“A strange coincidence indeed.” Xiao Chiye felt inexplicably displeased. “How did the man I dug to the center of the earth to find end up in Yan Heru’s grubby little hands?”

Chen Yang collected the empty bowl. “That Yan Heru is a coward; he’s mortally afraid of death. Zhongbo was in chaos last year. It’d be no surprise if he sought out the venerable master as insurance to preserve his own life…”

His voice gradually trailed off, replaced by a silence that reigned in the tent for a long time.

It was well known that Xiao Chiye was looking for the Venerable Master Yideng. There had been news of his search going around since the sixth month of last year. If Yan Heru was already aware of Master Yideng's whereabouts then, why had he not said a word all this time?

"I'll be staying at Second Sand Camp for the next few days." Xiao Chiye folded the letter. "Gu Jin, ride south tonight to Duanzhou. I want you to keep watch at the prefectural governor's side. If the venerable master arrives without a hitch, come back. If not…"

Xiao Chiye's eyes were an abyss of darkness. If not, then he would have Yan Heru's worthless life.

Yan Heru sneezed several times in a row. Clutching his handkerchief, he blew his nose and rubbed it until it was chapped red. He sat on the chair and craned his neck to watch Yao Wenyu write. "Mister Yuanzhuo's handwriting is like flying eagles and darting hares. Not only are the strokes strong, but the elegance of—"

Yan Heru launched into a soliloquy of flattery and finished by smiling at Yao Wenyu again.

"Want some melon seeds? It's pretty boring sitting here. When will His Lordship be done with his work? Is he this busy every day? He should really see to his health. It'd be a shame if he collapsed from exhaustion, no? At least Master Yideng is already on his way. If I've calculated right, he should arrive in the next few days. When he does, we gotta ask the venerable master to take a look at your legs. No doubt he can get you back on your feet."

Yao Wenyu's brushstroke skewed across the paper, though he showed no trace of anger and merely looked at it regretfully.

Observing Yao Wenyu's expression, Yan Heru leaned over the table. "You must hate Xue Yanqing for subjecting you to such misfortune. How awful he is, hm? How about teaming up with me to set a trap for him? We'll make the most of the mayhem to off him, then hang his corpse up in Qudu to rot for days or until you're appeased!"

With a slight frown, Yao Wenyu set down his brush. “Such an act would be depraved.”

Yan Heru looked at him sympathetically. “That’s right, you’re a scholar. They’re all sticklers for morality. But merchants like me don’t mind. Someone who doesn’t avenge a vendetta is a fool. The harder you commit to settling the score and getting what’s yours, the better it feels.”

Yao Wenyu felt those words to be loaded with meaning. He rolled up his sleeves and made to answer, but Yan Heru raised a finger to shush him.

In the silence, the sound of footsteps in the courtyard was particularly clear. Shen Zechuan, who had been in the main hall, had stepped out. He seemed to be standing on the covered walkway, listening to someone submit a murmured report.

Outside, Qiao Tianya stood at the door beside Shen Zechuan. As the messenger finished his account, his expression changed. “An accident?”

“An accident!” The Embroidered Uniform Guard member delivering the message confirmed as he mopped sweat from his brow. “Your Lordship, the carriage was right outside Fanzhou. Before Luo Mu could send men out to welcome the guests, the carriage overturned!”

Fei Sheng pressed in a step closer and asked, urgent, “What about the venerable master?”

Inside the room, Yan Heru covered his mouth, his eyes darting around, and said regretfully to Yao Wenyu, “Heaven be my witness, this has absolutely nothing to do with me. I’ve been right here in front of you and His Lordship this whole time.”

His wide doe eyes seemed harmless, but sparks of malice danced within. “Mister Yuanzhuo, it’s really over now.”

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Chapter 227:
Child Prodigy

"BY THE TIME THE MEN we sent to receive them reached Chazhou's borders, the venerable master's carriage had already arrived from Hezhou. The Hezhou yamen was pursuing them, so they rode straight through, without daring to stop on the way. The carriage overturned on the old road outside the city of Chazhou and plunged into a stream." The guard hesitated. "It shattered on impact. There were no survivors."

The guards in the courtyard fell as silent as cicadas in winter, the only sounds the murmur of running water. The bamboo tube in the pond tapped against the rock, and fresh water from the pond washed over the stone surface, turning the moss so dark it looked black.

Fei Sheng's heart sank as he looked at Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan's expression was unexpectedly calm. After standing in the covered walkway a moment, he asked, "Why was the Hezhou yamen pursuing the venerable master's carriage?"

"While passing through the border checks, they claimed to be relatives of the Yan Clan," the guard reported. "They didn't know Qudu had issued an imperial edict—the entire prefecture of Hezhou is on the hunt for Yan Heru. The moment the local government heard they were related to the Yan Clan, they assumed they were absconding to flee punishment."

It was too much of a coincidence, as if the heavens themselves were preventing the venerable master from reaching Zhongbo.

Fei Sheng didn't believe in this kind of coincidence, and Qiao Tianya even less so. The men they'd dispatched to receive the carriage were the best of the best. If they said the carriage overturned, then it must have been a real accident with no tampering—or at least, no evidence.

Interesting.

Shen Zechuan had guessed Master Yideng had met an untimely end well before the guard finished his report. Anything less, and the Embroidered Uniform Guard could have resolved it themselves instead of

bringing the matter to him. If Yan Heru considered Master Yideng his trump card, he had disposed of it far too urgently this time—so much so that Shen Zechuan found it hard to believe he was ever going to hand the venerable master over in the first place.

Why would Yan Heru dare to do this?

Shen Zechuan held up his folding fan to stop Qiao Tianya from speaking. Glancing at the side hall where Yan Heru sat waiting, he said, "It's late. Go get ready."

With a solemn nod, Qiao Tianya retreated.

By the time Shen Zechuan lifted the hanging screen and entered, Yao Wenyu had left. Yan Heru was bouncing his leg absently as he fiddled with his golden abacus. He had no proficiency in mental arithmetic, but he was extraordinarily good at calculations with the abacus. As long as the beads were clacking away noisily between his fingers, he'd never confuse the numbers in his mind.

"What happened to the Venerable Master Yideng?" Yan Heru flicked the last bead. As Shen Zechuan sat down, he leaned across the table and added, "I heard some commotion."

No servants were waiting in attendance in this room, so Shen Zechuan poured a cup of hot tea for himself. Through the willowy spirals of steam redolent with the fragrance of tea leaves, he replied simply, "An accident."

Yan Heru exclaimed in surprise. "Heavens! Is the venerable master all right? I reminded them over and over to be careful—I even asked my best men from home to escort him."

Rather than drink the tea, Shen Zechuan pulled over the empty porcelain saucer and emptied the tea into it as if he was rinsing the cup. With a gentle shake of his head, he said, "They said the carriage plunged into a stream in its frantic escape from the Hezhou yamen's pursuers. All the passengers died on the spot. A terrible pity. I was counting on the venerable master to extend my life this year."

Yan Heru's expression underwent a slight shift. "The venerable master is gone?"

Shen Zechuan gripped the empty cup and looked up at Yan Heru. His gaze was steady. “The venerable master is gone.”

Yan Heru’s expression had been calm, without the slightest ripple, but under Shen Zechuan’s gaze, uncertainty stole over his face. Tentatively, he said, “I…already gave him up to you.”

Shen Zechuan loosened his grip, and the cup fell to the table, where it rolled several times before bumping against the edge of Yan Heru’s golden abacus. The lanterns in this room were all in the back, partially obstructed by the hanging bamboo blinds; the table was full of shadows. Shen Zechuan didn’t speak for a long time, merely scrutinizing Yan Heru from behind his fan. He was unable to find the slightest trace of concealment on that face. On this point alone, Yan Heru was better at this game than Xi Hongxuan.

Finally Shen Zechuan laughed. He lowered his fan and set it on the table. “A truly unexpected misfortune; how can I blame you for it?”

He didn’t seem angry. Yan Heru couldn’t figure out what the governor was thinking. But he had come to have some understanding of Shen Zechuan over these past six months, and he knew this was not the moment to rush or get anxious. Shen Zechuan excelled at mind games. The moment Yan Heru dropped his guard, the prefectural governor might turn hostile.

“Your Lordship is broad-minded—as expected of a ruler in turbulent times,” Yan Heru said. “I’ve seen my share of so-called great heroes, but none come close to Your Lordship. Whatever shall we do now that the venerable master is no more? I can see Mister Yuanzhuo’s health is worsening by the day. He needs urgent treatment.”

“Physicians are common, but miraculous healers are rare indeed. Now that I think of it, where *did* you find Master Yideng in the first place?” Shen Zechuan asked with interest.

“Hezhou, of course.” Yan Heru’s expression relaxed. “Perhaps Your Lordship doesn’t know—Hezhou was the venerable master’s home before he became a monk. When I heard Er-ye was looking for him, I sent a few men to keep an eye on his former abode. As luck would have it, he went back for a visit. What a pity I was too late. Had I sent for him a few days earlier, the venerable master might have been in Duanzhou by now.”

"It wasn't meant to be," Shen Zechuan said. "It can't be helped."

"But I do know a few retired imperial physicians in Juexi, all masters of their art. They used to treat the Guangcheng Emperor." Yan Heru righted the fallen cup. "Their reputations are no less prestigious than Master Yideng's; they're quite renowned in the thirteen cities. Many high-ranking officials and noblemen knock on their doors for a consultation. If Your Lordship wishes to meet them, I'll bring them with me next time I come back, yes?"

Unexpectedly, Shen Zechuan picked up the teapot and poured for Yan Heru. "They must cost a fortune, huh?"

"If a mere forty—no? Fifty?—thousand taels of silver can improve Your Lordship's health, then it's no trouble at all." Seeing that the tea was about to overflow, Yan Heru lifted a hand to stop him. "It makes me happy to spend money for Your Lordship."

A gust of night breeze slid around some corner, sending ripples across the surface of the tea. Hand still outstretched, Yan Heru lowered his voice. "I heard the second young master of the Xi Clan had set a trap for Your Lordship in Qudu but ended up killing himself right before your eyes. Tsk, tsk. Must have been a mess with his blood spilled all over the ground. How tragic."

Shen Zechuan didn't set down the teapot. With a smile, he said, "One who does many wrongs is doomed to bring about his own downfall. I couldn't have stopped him even if I wanted to."

"But as I see it," Yan Heru said, "Your Lordship is no man of honor *either*—" He held the word until he dissolved into giggles. "I'm on familiar terms with the Embroidered Uniform Guard in your manor already, Your Lordship. So why are they waiting for me outside?"

The candle flames in the room jumped and flickered. All was quiet in the courtyard; Shen Zechuan's guards seemed to have disappeared.

Yan Heru drew his hand back. Undaunted, he continued, "I never learned any martial arts, not even any pretty moves for show. Why make such a fuss if Your Lordship wants to kill me? Draw Avalanche and gut me like a fish." He smacked his thigh lightly and said as though he had just remembered, "Oh, I forgot. Your Lordship can't hold a blade anymore. No

wonder Er-ye is searching every corner of the land for Yideng. He must be absolutely sick with worry."

This little shit. Fei Sheng cursed silently where he crouched on the rooftop.

"How could I bear to kill you?" Shen Zechuan set down the teapot. "Qidong is still counting on you to supply their military provisions in the fourth month, and you're shouldering the expenses for the Liuzhou port too. Without you, who will handle this business on my behalf?"

"See, I figured Your Lordship couldn't do it." Yan Heru tapped the handle of his chair with his fingers. His leg jiggled. "But hey, it can't be helped. You were ripping me off so bad a while back, but now half your assets are staked on my ventures. Let me say a word in all honesty, okay? I can't bear to fall out with you either. Where else would I find such a good-looking and intelligent master like Your Lordship? I swear, this whole saga with Yideng is a total surprise to me. If Your Lordship agrees, I'll give Mister Yuanzhuo twenty thousand taels of silver as an apology. Would that do? Happiness is what matters most—otherwise, life isn't worth living."

Just as it seemed the atmosphere in the room would thaw, Shen Zechuan spoke. "Master Yideng died a long time ago, didn't he?"

Yan Heru looked at Shen Zechuan with a smile still plastered on his face. "That can't be."

"If he were still alive, you would never have given him up so easily." Shen Zechuan ran a finger along the edge of his fan and said contemplatively, "What do the eight cities' granaries matter? Even if I was put out over it, I wouldn't kill you. But it's hard to say when it comes to Master Yideng." Shen Zechuan's expressive eyes were dark as ink as he regarded Yan Heru. "Ce'an expended so much effort searching for the venerable master. If he'd tracked him down only to find he'd died on your watch, even the Jade Emperor in heaven couldn't save you. You had to rid yourself of this lit fuse as soon as possible."

Yan Heru had come to apologize and admit fault over the matter of the eight cities' granaries. Qudu's probing had led them to the Pan Clan's city of Dancheng, and in that investigation, Xue Yanqing had briefly emerged as the victor. Yan Heru must have long known he would be wanted by the imperial court. He merely had to feign handing over Master Yideng

and give the Hezhou yamen an opportunity to hunt down his carriage. That way, the accident that led to the venerable master's demise would appear entirely natural.

This was a card Yan Heru had been reluctant to play, but he was truly out of options. He really had found Master Yideng in Hezhou, and had kept him imprisoned in his manor since the beginning of the year—but he hadn't expected the man to die in his charge. The leverage he'd planned to use to threaten Shen Zechuan had become a fatal liability. Once Xiao Chiye sniffed out the venerable master's whereabouts, Yan Heru wouldn't be given any opportunity to explain himself. Only by facing Shen Zechuan did he stand a chance of striking a deal that could guarantee his survival.

"You're so smart." Yan Heru had never been stingy with praise. He clutched his abacus tighter and continued, "But if Your Lordship is still willing to sit here and talk, you must also be willing to show mercy. I've been doing some calculations. The six prefectures of Zhongbo can't afford to supply a year's worth of military provisions to both the northern and southern battlefields. Not to mention, Your Lordship wishes to restore the people of Zhongbo's livelihoods. I'm not like Xi Hongxuan—every step of the way, you can't do without me."

"You are indeed unlike Xi Hongxuan. Why compare yourself to him?" Shen Zechuan found Yan Heru fascinating. "You're extravagant in your dealings, and you go about decked in gold and silver: Your robes are embroidered with copper coins and ingots, and you hang a golden abacus around your neck. You want the whole world to know you love money. But is money really what you love?"

Xi Hongxuan had also been an ostentatious man who loved to flaunt his wealth, but never to the same extent. Compared to the gauche Yan Heru, Xi Hongxuan had possessed a nobleman's refinement. If one considered the amount of silver stockpiled in the Xi Clan's treasuries versus the Yan Clan's sparser vaults, Xi Hongxuan might even have been considered a dutiful and frugal son. Yan Heru was just the opposite. All his business transactions required a hefty upfront investment. Rather than a desire for wealth itself, it might be more apt to say he was obsessed with the business of making money.

The exorbitant profits from the Chazhou grain trade had propelled the Yan Clan into a meteoric rise. Yan Heru had followed his success there with the expansion of the small trade market in Dunzhou, secretly working with the noble clans to resell official goods. The wealth he had accrued couldn't be spent in three lifetimes, yet that had never stopped him from trying.

Throwing his lot in with Shen Zechuan had been an excellent opportunity for him to wash his hands of his less savory dealings. His ventures in the past had all been clandestine transactions made under the table. To scrub himself clean, he needed only behave himself and supply provisions and salaries to the northern and southern battlefields, on top of paying his respects to the prefectural governor from time to time. Once the dust of war settled and Shen Zechuan sat at the top, no one would be able to lay a finger on him, if only on account of the service he'd done in supplying military grain. He would seamlessly evolve into an honored official with incomparable merits to his name.

But this was not what Yan Heru wanted.

The very real recalcitrance in his nature stemmed from the same boldness that led him to propose ideas like building a new port.

It wasn't that this young man was not smart. The reputation that preceded him was also the truth: He was a child prodigy. In fact, he was *too* smart, too practiced at exploiting every trick in the book. Had he not played the Eight Great Clans for fools too? Even now, they were trailing after him to pick up the coins he dropped. It didn't matter if those he dealt with were powerful ministers or lords with lofty ambitions—he feared no one.

Cradling his golden abacus, Yan Heru curled up in his chair and laughed aloud, his dimples deep. When he was done, he sighed. "Your Lordship, is your heart really set on fighting your way to the top? Why not join me in business? Then I won't be so lonely anymore."

Shen Zechuan sighed too. "I was born at the wrong time."

"So was I," Yan Heru said, cocking his head. "If only I'd been born twenty years earlier, there'd have been no room for Xi Hongxuan. That fatso was so stupid he wasted the best cards the Xi Clan ever had." He raised his chin arrogantly. "See how the noble clans keep changing one emperor for another. When it was my turn, I'd want to swap a few for fun too."

Shen Zechuan still hadn't made any move to kill him. Yan Heru took a sip of tea to moisten his throat and continued. "Personally, I admire Your Lordship so much I'd prostrate at your feet, but somehow there's always a little…difference of opinion between us. Have I told you about my mother? She was a fisherman's daughter from Hezhou who grew up never having enough to eat, yet she still had to rear her good-for-nothing brothers for her parents. Well, she got fed up with the abuse at home—one day she hit the ceiling. She jumped into the river and ran away from home. Disguised as a man, she crewed a boat for over ten years before going on to build a sprawling tea business in Hezhou with her sworn brothers. None of them had any family, so after some discussion, they decided to all take the surname Yan. How nice, right? As long as you've got money, you can do whatever your heart desires."

He laughed again. "While established men took concubines, my mother went around picking husbands. She loved all the good-looking men in Hezhou, but my father was the most handsome of all. My mother died young, so my father became Master Yan. He was a businessman too, but he was timid, afraid of everything. Hell, he didn't even raise his head when he met the Xi Clan's shopkeeper."

Yan Heru had been well-educated in the classics of the sages, but all their talk of benevolence, righteousness, morals, and virtues was mere rhetoric; it had nothing to do with him. Those who spoke of benevolence and righteousness—didn't they all die young? As time went on, he became more and more convinced of one thing: It didn't matter how long he lived, as long as he lived to his heart's content.

He appeared vulnerable and scared of everyone; level a sword at him, and he would shiver in fear. Yet he took risks those armed with real blades would never dream of taking.

What kind of fortune was there to be made in Zhongbo? Yan Heru knew all too well. He'd seen homeless migrants strewn over the lands when his carriage passed through the six prefectures. Pitiful creatures—but what did they have to do with him? He was merely having his fun while he could in this harsh world. If a peasant in Zhongbo starved to death, that couldn't be pinned on him. There were plenty in line before him who carried more blame.

Where was his fault in all this?

Yan Heru leaned over the table. “How am I to blame here? The fall of Zhongbo had nothing to do with me; that was Shen Wei’s fault. As for reselling grain…well, if I didn’t do it, others would have. Rather than letting those taels be wasted on other people, I thought I might as well use the money to build a trade market. Money has to circulate, you see. What’s the point of burying it in shut-up coffers like the Xi Clan did?”

Shen Zechuan had wanted to eliminate Yan Heru, so Yan Heru had hidden Master Yideng away. What was wrong with that? It just so happened that the venerable master didn’t survive. It wasn’t as if he’d killed him.

“The venerable master was an old man. He would’ve died soon even if I didn’t take him in—his time was up. He might’ve even died in the middle of nowhere, instead of comfortable at home,” Yan Heru said.

Yan Heru was too young. He was, in certain aspects, just as naive as he looked. It wasn’t that he’d had no one to teach him, but no one who taught him had ever been his intellectual match. Cai Yu, whom he’d called “Pa,” had once been a righteous bandit who gave generously to the old and weak, women and children, in Chazhou in his earlier years. But in the end, that man had still entered into despicable deals with Yan Heru.

“All men like to preach about morality and righteousness, but that’s just talk, no?” Yan Heru jumped down from the chair, still hugging his abacus. “Everything in this world is driven by personal interests. Money exists to be spent. Spend it, and you can have everything. It’s true I don’t care about hoarding wealth because I can earn much, much more. There’s no business I can’t turn a profit on.”

It had gone very quiet in the room—too quiet, Yan Heru thought. He deliberated a moment and continued. “As for what happened to Master Yideng…if Your Lordship takes it to heart, then there’s nothing I can say. I made a bad move, I admit it, so of course I’m willing to make amends. If there’s any medicinal herbs you need, you just let me know. And I’ll still deliver Qidong’s military provisions this year. Let’s turn the page on this business, hm?”

Shen Zechuan pinned him with his gaze. “You should go.”

Yan Heru remained fixed in place. Attempting to explain himself further, he added, “The construction of the Port of Liuzhou is at a critical juncture. Your Lordship, I’ll come call on you again the day after tomorrow to show you the plans.”

Still, Shen Zechuan was silent.

The candle flame had burned low, leaving the room dark and gloomy. Suddenly, Yan Heru was afraid. It was different from any fear he had felt in the past, a slow, icy terror that seeped into his bones. He knew the kind of man Shen Zechuan was. Shen Zechuan wouldn’t kill him, because an intelligent man wouldn’t do such a thing. Of that he was absolutely certain.

Yan Heru took a few steps back. When he reached the door, he flashed a smile at Shen Zechuan and turned to lift the hanging screen and step out. A maidservant waited under the eaves with a lantern. Yan Heru looked at that white lantern, as pale and unadorned as for a funeral procession, and his hair stood on end.

The candle in the room had gone out. It was so quiet in the courtyard that not a sound could be heard.

Yan Heru didn’t let the maidservant see him out. He grabbed the lantern from her and hustled down the veranda alone. He walked faster and faster until he broke into a frantic run, as if something was stalking him in the shadows. Gasping for breath, he raced ahead with everything he had. At this moment, he had to admit he was still afraid of death.

“I—I’ve got the silver—for Qidong—”

The soft thump of feet landed on the ground behind him. He looked back in a panic and saw nothing. He sobbed like a child who had broken a vase, aggrieved to be facing punishment for such an inconsequential mistake.

“Shen Zechuan—!”

Shen Zechuan sat in his chair and poured Yan Heru’s unfinished tea onto the ground, just as he’d done for Xi Hongxuan when he died.

The spent tea leaves lay on the rug, where they dried up in no time.

Too-clever brats abounded in this world. But not every adversary was willing to tolerate them.

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Chapter 228:
A Future

FEI SHENG WAS METICULOUS in his duties. The guards washed all traces of blood from the walkway at top speed, and the entire affair was over in the time it took to finish a cup of tea. When Fei Sheng lifted the hanging screen to Shen Zechuan's room, he found the prefectural governor dozing off, his eyes fluttering shut. He lowered his voice. "Master, it's been taken care of."

Shen Zechuan seemed only half awake, his heavy-lidded eyes staring at the candle about to burn out. Sitting there, absorbed in the flame, he gave off an unapproachable aura. After a while, he asked, "Where is Gu Jin?"

"He should arrive at Mount Luo tonight," Fei Sheng replied.

Looking more awake, Shen Zechuan hummed a sound of acknowledgment. "Tell him to go back."

Fei Sheng went down on one knee by the door and paused, careful to keep his tone neutral. "He'll have Er-ye's letter with him, Master. Mount Luo isn't far from Duanzhou. It won't take much time for him to deliver it."

Shen Zechuan didn't respond; he was in a poor mood tonight. Fei Sheng shut his mouth and wisely took his leave. In the time it took to burn through two sticks of incense, Qiao Tianya arrived, pushing Yao Wenyu in his wheelchair.

The bamboo blinds rose and fell to admit him. Shen Zechuan glanced over. "Why haven't you retired yet, Yuanzhuo? It's so late."

Yao Wenyu set the book he was holding on his lap and rearranged his thin blanket. "Without Yan Heru, the shops in Hezhou will be in disarray. Since Your Lordship is here thinking on this problem tonight, perhaps I can share my humble opinion."

Yuanzhuo had excelled for years at philosophical debates. His voice was like the murmuring of spring water—soothing and extremely pleasant to the ear.

Shen Zechuan turned toward the door. “Light the lamps and bring tea.”

A maidservant entered to remove the tea-stained rug and replace the lamps, brightening the room a little. Fei Sheng quietly instructed her to brew the tea strong, that it might keep the prefectural governor and his advisor alert.

“Kill Yan Heru, and the shops in Hezhou will be in disarray for a time; let Yan Heru live, and commerce throughout the land will be in turmoil forever.” Shen Zechuan didn’t touch the teacup but forced himself to stay focused. “He was so certain I wouldn’t take his life. If I acceded to his wishes, there would be no end to our troubles in the future.”

Shen Zechuan had no patience for obstinate brats. The moment Yan Heru mentioned Master Yideng, Shen Zechuan had decided his fate. Shen Zechuan could be made a fool of, but he refused to be coerced. The truth was, Yan Heru didn’t understand Shen Zechuan or Xiao Chiye at all. He hadn’t the slightest clue which of the pair was the sheath and which the blade.

Xiao Chiye’s urgency in seeking Master Yideng was driven by his recent and still-raw loss. Shen Zechuan only had to think of how Xiao Chiye would feel upon learning the news to resolve that Yan Heru couldn’t live a second longer.

Yao Wenyu waited for the maidservant to leave before speaking. “Yan Heru came without an entourage this time. He left his aides behind in Hezhou, too, all to make Your Lordship think twice about making any move against him.”

It was just as Yan Heru had said. He was completely defenseless, with no martial arts knowledge, even for show. He’d dared to strut right into Shen Zechuan’s own house and threaten him because he was assured of his success. He’d left all of his trusted aides behind. If he didn’t return home as scheduled, the Yan Clan would break off the bottommost rung of the trade route linking Huaizhou, Cizhou, and Chazhou and refuse access to the merchants of Zhongbo. Shen Zechuan would be forced to go through Huaizhou and take a detour near Dicheng, then pass through the Port of Yongyi to make it deep into Juexi. This route not only took a toll in terms of

time and energy, it also required dealing with various checkpoints along the way. Even the slightest slip-up could spell failure.

"All merchants are driven by profit," Shen Zechuan said. "Zhongbo is a crucial hub between Libei and Qidong. The Yan Clan would be choking off not only my trade route, but that of all the traveling merchants who have already invested in it. These people have had a taste of rare delicacies. If you tell them to return to eating wild forage, no matter how it tastes, it won't be enough to fill their stomachs."

Shen Zechuan was unlike the bandits Yan Heru had dealt with in the past. He held legitimate power in the east, far greater than anything the likes of Cai Yu and Lei Jingzhe had ever wielded. He could negotiate border tariffs in both regions in the east, and he had a tight grip on Luoxia Pass, the trade market in Libei, and Dengzhou. If Yan Heru had tried to coerce him with trade alone, his success would have depended on whether or not Shen Zechuan was willing to play along.

The armaments required by the Zhongbo garrison troops this year were significant in number, and it was impossible for Shen Zechuan to manufacture them himself. The copper mines were all in the west. The merchants who had been stealthily scalping imperial copper were still stuck with last year's stock. By now they were burning with anxiety and desperate to hop onto the ship that was Zhongbo. If the prefectural governor wanted to do business, he didn't need to go knocking on doors. The instant His Lordship said the word, these people would trek thousands of miles to sell what they had on hand. It was well known that Liang Cuishan and Jiang Qingshan were conducting strict checks on all goods passing through their lands. As long as official copper that belonged to the imperial court remained in these merchants' warehouses, there was a chance they could be exposed. At that point, they were as good as dead. Shen Zechuan was the only person in the world who could buy up everything and get it off their hands.

As for Qidong's military provisions, Shen Zechuan wasn't worried about those either.

When Shen Zechuan had taken over the Xi Clan's shops, he had gone to considerable effort, relying on Xi Dan and Ge Qingqing. Because the Xi Clan was a noble family and particular about bequeathing its inheritance

only to those of their own surname, he had spared the life of the eldest mistress Xi. But this was not the case for the Yan Clan, a group of sworn siblings who had established themselves through the tea trade. Perhaps sentimental ties had bound them during Yan Heru's mother's generation, but by the time Yan Heru was rising, it was strictly the capable ones who ruled the family. With Yan Heru out of the picture, the brothers scrambling to take his place would all be willing to negotiate with the prefectural governor. Even if Shen Zechuan didn't say a word about the Qidong military provisions, he'd have people lining up to be his supplier.

Yan Heru was important, but nowhere near as important as he'd thought himself to be.

"The port in Liuzhou was under the sole control of Yan Heru," Yao Wenyu said. "We don't have all the details about its construction. However, Xi Dan is currently in Juexi managing the Xi Clan's businesses on Your Lordship's behalf. Get him to send a few men over to take charge, and that should address most of our concerns. What is of utmost urgency at present is the substantial sum of silver required to complete the port. I'm afraid it will prove difficult for Zhongbo to bear the costs alone."

"What do you suggest?"

"Your Lordship will return to Qudu eventually. At that time, all the merchants in the world will be Your Lordship's merchants." Yao Wenyu paused as a coughing fit took hold of him and continued only after he'd caught his breath. "The trade that comes from the completion of the port will profit everyone. Why not let the merchants contribute to the port's financing—let them claim a stake in it? Your Lordship only needs to open up Liuzhou in the future and adjust the tariffs accordingly, and these stakeholders will become the treasury of the new dynasty, and Your Lordship's treasury as well."

And that wasn't all. Yan Heru's idea of building a port in Liuzhou had been truly brilliant. The bay could accommodate a sizable number of ships; the revival of Liuzhou and its surrounding towns was right on the horizon. This was a fertile field on the precipice of being reclaimed and put under the plow of progress. If these merchants were not muddleheaded fools, they'd jump at the chance to throw in with Shen Zechuan for a share of the profits.

Yao Wenyu could imagine a day when the malady that was the noble clans was completely eradicated, and the nation would begin its recuperation and rehabilitation. Liuzhou would become Shen Zechuan's largest port linking the southeast—perhaps even the first major port to connect to lands abroad. By then—

He covered his mouth with his sleeve as he broke out into violent coughs. In his haste, he knocked over the teacup, spilling hot tea over his blanket and soaking his legs.

"Yuanzhuo!" Shen Zechuan called out in concern, bending closer. He'd already risen to his feet and caught the teacup.

Whatever Yao Wenyu had wanted to say had been lost. He had so many words unsaid, stuck in his chest and choked by his coughs. As he covered his mouth, he raised his other hand to signal that he was fine.

"Fei Sheng!" Shen Zechuan saw blood seeping through Yao Wenyu's wide sleeve and barked, "Summon the physician!"

Outside, Fei Sheng immediately turned to shout for the attendants. Qiao Tianya had been struck by a sense of foreboding as soon as he heard the teacup fall inside. Before Shen Zechuan could call for him, he lifted the hanging screen and hurried in.

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Chapter 229:
Pan Lin

AT MOUNT LUO, Gu Jin was about to climb back onto his horse to continue on his way when he received the letter from Duanzhou. He turned to look at Huo Lingyun, who was there for a fresh batch of horses, with a complicated expression. “Did His Lordship write this just before you set out?”

Beside his own horse, Huo Lingyun nodded as he unscrewed his waterskin to take a swig. “It was written just last night.”

Gu Jin tucked the letter into his robes and retrieved another, which he handed to Huo Lingyun. “This is from Er-ye to His Lordship.” After a pause he asked, “What did the Embroidered Uniform Guard who went to investigate the carriage say?”

“That the Hezhou yamen was hot on their tail, and the carriage driver was in such a desperate panic he drove right off the neglected road and into the stream below.” Huo Lingyun hung the waterskin back onto his saddle and carefully stowed Xiao Chiye’s letter in his own lapels. “They sent a few men down to the stream and searched for hours. There were no survivors.”

Gu Jin’s expression darkened further. He had set out to greet Master Yideng, with implicit orders to guard the venerable master on Xiao Chiye’s behalf. Now his mark was gone before he’d even arrived. Gu Jin stood rooted in place, utterly perplexed. He muttered, “What was the venerable master doing in Hezhou?”

“Wasn’t that his home before he became a monk?” Having ridden the entire night, Huo Lingyun reeked of sweat. “Based on what Yan Heru said, it seems Master Yideng died of illness. If he didn’t expect to live much longer, maybe he returned home to see his kin.”

“The venerable master cut ties with the secular world the day he joined the monastery. Anyone still left in his family would be distant relations, not any close kin.” Remembering Master Yideng’s sojourns in the Libei homeland, he continued, “Besides, the venerable master agreed to

return to Libei this year. Even if he didn't expect to live much longer, he would fulfill his promise first."

Huo Lingyun had never crossed paths with Master Yideng before; perhaps Gu Jin was right. He looked up and noticed the sky beginning to lighten. "I've rested enough. I should hit the road."

Gu Jin nudged his horse aside to make way. Huo Lingyun turned and added, "When you reach the front line, remember to tell Er-ye that Tantai Hu wants to try out those new sabers too."

"Tell Lao-Hu to send a letter himself. I'm not heading that way." Gu Jin scraped mud off the soles of his boots, swung into the saddle, and pointed into the distance with his riding crop. "I'm off to Hezhou."

Doctors crowded quietly on the veranda outside, not daring to raise their voices. Seeing that this was not the place for a discussion, Fei Sheng hurriedly arranged for the physicians to gather in the room next door.

Kong Ling didn't enter to disturb Yao Wenyu's rest; instead he followed Fei Sheng and asked, "What do the doctors say?"

Fei Sheng cast a glance at the lowered bamboo blinds and led Kong Ling a little aside. "They're terrified," he whispered. "Their prescriptions are even weaker than the ones we use in the Guard. No one dares to go too heavy on the herbs for Mister Yuanzhuo."

Kong Ling was widely read, but he wasn't well-versed in medicine. He held still for a moment, his expression one of shock. "Then…"

Fei Sheng couldn't say for sure either. Everyone had pinned their hopes on the Venerable Master Yideng; Yan Heru's gambit had caught them all off guard. He ducked to avoid a newly sprouted branch in the courtyard. "His Lordship wrote to Ge Qingqing last night and bade him search for physicians in Juexi's thirteen cities. But they likely won't arrive in Duanzhou until the sixth month."

How would they survive the next three months?

Fei Sheng didn't dare speak out of turn. He had been on tenterhooks too as he watched the physicians coming and going all night. Yao Wenyu continued to push himself to his limits. In Cizhou, he had first drained his

energy to placate the masses of scholars who had come to join Shen Zechuan, then stayed up in discussions with Kong Ling and the others for nights on end to make arrangements for the six prefectures' regional administrations. He had then immediately traveled from Cizhou to Duanzhou. It was no wonder he hadn't been well since he arrived.

Kong Ling stood silent for a moment. "Wait here so I can update the governor. His Lordship hasn't slept the whole night. He's still waiting in the hall for news."

"Then please convince my master to rest." Fei Sheng had been shaken by the sight of Yao Wenyu coughing up blood. He chased Kong Ling a few steps. "He seemed in low spirits after the news of Master Yideng's demise, and now he's worried about Mister Yuanzhuo. I pray he doesn't fall sick too. With Qiao Tianya and me keeping watch here, nothing serious will happen—he should sleep."

Kong Ling agreed and rushed out of the courtyard, lifting the hem of his robe in his haste. When he arrived at Shen Zechuan's courtyard, he found the prefectural governor standing on the veranda, listening to Ding Tao. Spotting Kong Ling, he nodded for Ding Tao to pause.

Ever since the incident in Dunzhou where he had glimpsed the unguarded ruthlessness in Shen Zechuan's eyes, Ding Tao had been well-behaved. He promptly shut his mouth and retreated to make way for Kong Ling.

After deliberating a moment, Kong Ling said, "He's just fallen asleep. They're decocting the medicine now. Qiao Tianya is overseeing everything, so Your Lordship needn't worry."

It was peaceful and quiet in the courtyard. Shen Zechuan came down the stairs to meet him. "None of the physicians gave a diagnosis?"

Kong Ling noted Shen Zechuan's displeased expression and fell into step at his side. "These are all country doctors. They've never treated someone like Yuanzhuo before. They don't dare to fool us with common prescriptions, and they're cautious in everything they say. Even so, they're doing everything they can. No one dares be careless."

Astute as he was, Shen Zechuan knew that no one among this group of physicians could treat Yuanzhuo. They would all err on the side of

prescribing rest and nourishment, doing their best to avoid any risk.

"Send an urgent missive to Yu Xiaozai." Shen Zechuan stopped in his tracks. "Tell him to keep an eye out for good physicians in every prefecture during his inspection rounds. He's to send all the ones he can find to Duanzhou. Draw the consultation fees from my private coffers; we'll give them whatever they ask."

A guard arrived with a letter. Kong Ling delayed his answer so Shen Zechuan could read it in peace.

Shen Zechuan turned over the letter and saw Ge Qingqing's personal seal. When he finished reading, he handed it to Kong Ling. "The battle in Qudu is over."

Kong Ling took a moment to read the letter. "What Marshal Qi lacks at present is not military provisions, but a noble rank and title. The empress dowager recognized this, yet she stubbornly persisted in trying to coerce her and ended up giving Xue Yanqing a helping hand instead."

"The empress dowager simply has no way to back down," Shen Zechuan said. "She wants Qi Zhuyin's troops, but she has no bargaining chips left with which to win the marshal over. If push comes to shove, Han Cheng and his twenty thousand men can't beat anyone."

What Shen Zechuan had initially considered a strategy of befriending a distant state while attacking a nearby enemy had long been turned on its head. Qudu's fatigue was obvious. In the east, where they faced Zhongbo and Libei, they had only the Eight Great Battalions to aid them in an emergency. And with the issue of the commoners' fields blown up to such proportions, Dancheng had no attention to spare to maintaining a military defense. Qi Zhuyin was the last straw Qudu had to clutch at.

Kong Ling sucked a breath through his teeth when he reached the end of the letter. "Pan Xiangjie and Pan Lin are dead."

"The empress dowager is playing against Xue Xiuzhuo." Shen Zechuan looked up at the overcast sky, where storm clouds were gathering. "How could she escape unscathed?"

In Qudu, the rainy season had begun.

When the Grand Secretariat wanted to hold Han Cheng accountable for the debacle in the prison, Han Cheng stuck to his narrative that the officials the Eight Great Battalions had killed were Zhongbo's spies. Both sides engaged in a war of words in the imperial court, and it was amid all this that the news of Pan Xiangjie's death was reported.

Only then did Liang Cuishan recall that no one had paid Pan Xiangjie any heed when he cried for help that day, locked up in the innermost part of the prison. The situation had been chaotic; Pan Xiangjie had suffocated to death from the smoke in his cell. It seemed the jailers had only found him when they went to clean up.

"It was Pan Lin who admitted to the collusion regarding the granaries," Xue Xiuzhuo had announced in Mingli Hall. "He was also the one who turned over the detailed accounts from the Ministry of Revenue. This man doesn't deserve to be punished with death."

Cen Yu, too, found what had happened to Pan Lin regrettable. He nodded. "That's not to say he should be exonerated. Justice cannot be tampered with—but it can be tempered with mercy."

Kong Qiu had pondered for some time, looking through the confession statement presented by the Ministry of Justice over and over. "It's true Pan Lin confessed, but that was only after the imperial court began its investigation. He's been an accessory to this crime since discrepancies first started to appear in the accounts years ago. He may be spared execution, but not punishment."

In the end, the Grand Secretariat dismissed Pan Lin from his post, demoted him in status, and exiled him to Huaizhou. But as the Dancheng case was yet unresolved, Pan Lin was to remain at the relay station and await the court's summons in the interim.

Unlike the nobility of Pan Xiangjie's generation, Pan Lin had studied to be a civil official and considered himself a scholar. He took pride in his occupation, and because of that, he had never gotten along with dilettantes like Xue Xiuyi. Yet now he was reduced from a young master of a noble clan to a guilty commoner, and he had lost his father on top of that. The abrupt change in his fortunes compounded his plight at the relay station, where he was disdained by his guards and handed only cold leftovers to eat.

Long ago, Xue Xiuyi had gotten into a spat with Pan Lin at the banquet celebrating Xiao Chiye's conferment. Xue Xiuyi, intending to bury the hatchet before Pan Lin was expelled from the capital, went to see Pan Lin, bringing some delicacies to share.

The servant at the relay station led Xue Xiuyi in. Looking around the cramped and narrow room, Xue Xiuyi asked, "This is where Pan Chengzhi is staying? He's the young master of the Pan Clan and the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Revenue. How can you keep him in a room like this?"

The servant opened the door with a smarmy smile. "Weren't the properties of the Pan Clan confiscated by the court? He's a criminal. This arrangement was made by the imperial court; how would we servants dare to defy it?" He pushed the door open and cautioned, "My lord mustn't stay too long. If the Ministry of Justice catches wind of this, it'll be my neck!"

Xue Xiuyi's scrawny body hunched as he craned his neck to look through the doorway. Pan Lin was sitting at a rickety desk by the window. The room was gloomy, and rain was leaking in everywhere; the floorboards were already soaked through. Pan Lin's robe was damp, as were his boots. Stubble shadowed his jaw, and he was still wearing the same clothes he'd worn in the prison. He looked very much the worse for wear.

Xue Xiuyi strode through the door carrying the food box and called gently, "Chengzhi, I'm here to see you."

Pan Lin looked up. He regarded him for a long while before saying, "Have a seat."

Setting the box on the table, Xue Xiuyi pulled up a chair. He surveyed the room. "You are at the very least—well, I'll go talk to them later. Even another room here would be better than this."

Pan Lin's eyes reddened at the rims. He was a forlorn figure as he sat under the fat drops of rain leaking through the roof.

Xue Xiuyi fidgeted. Before things could get too awkward, he took the initiative to speak. "I'm not here today to—to mock you. You're going to Huaizhou, and it's so far away. Once we part, you and I…we'll never see each other again. So I wanted to see you off."

Pan Lin remained unmoved.

Xue Xiuyi hesitated. For some reason, he found himself gripped by a feeling of melancholy. He was of legitimate birth, as was Pan Lin. How could lawful sons such as themselves end up in such a state? Tears shone in his eyes as he continued. “Chengzhi, about what happened during the marquis’s banquet last year… I’m sorry. I heard you let Yuanzhuo go, and I —I admire you for that. You’re a man of talent, and you’ve only suffered misfortune due to your clan. The Grand Secretary spared you from execution because he appreciates talented men like you. Once you arrive in Huaizhou, you’ll have the chance to show your mettle again.”

Even Xue Xiuyi didn’t believe these words. They were all men who depended on their clans for survival. The field tax scandal was already known far and wide; Pan Lin would be spat on in the streets when he arrived in Huaizhou.

After a moment of silence, Pan Lin spoke up, using Xue Xiuyi’s courtesy name. “Pingjing.”

Like Xue Xiuzhuo’s Yanqing, Xue Xiuyi’s courtesy name had been given to him by his grandfather, Old Master Xue. He hurriedly responded, “Aye.”

“Back when I first assumed my post as the Vice Minister of the Ministry of Revenue, I held the real account books in my hand for a long time. But in the end, I didn’t hand them over to Secretariat Elder Hai. I abetted the villains, bringing untold suffering to the common folk of the eight cities. My death is not to be regretted, and there’s nothing I could say that would vindicate me. The storm in Qudu has raged for years, and now there is Xue Yanqing.” Pan Lin looked at Xue Xiuyi as if seeing his own self many years ago, with choices still before him. “The glory of the eight cities has come to an end.”

A deafening thunderclap crashed overhead, and a bolt of lightning lit up the room for an instant. Xue Xiuyi thought Pan Lin would give him some heartfelt advice, but he merely said, “You should go.”

Xue Pingjing pushed the box across the table. “I brought you some food…” He trailed off. As he sat, the rain grew heavier and heavier; the servant outside had come by several times to hurry him.

When he at last rose to his feet, his robe was wet to the knee. He bowed in farewell to Pan Lin, who stood, straightened his clothes, and

returned the courtesy.

Xue Xiuyi couldn't bear to look at him a moment longer. He stepped into the corridor but couldn't tell which way was out.

Pan Lin listened to his receding footsteps, then sat back down at his table. Throughout it all, he had never touched the food box Xue Xiuyi brought. He picked up his brush and neatly wrote the words *Statement of Guilt*.

This letter was not for the imperial court, but for Pan Xiangjie—a farewell from a son to his father. The letter he wrote was a long one, as if he didn't know how to face his father yet. When he set his brush down, he wept, then cleaned himself up and lay down on the tattered mat with his clothes in order. He never opened his eyes again.

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Chapter 230:
The Fleeting Months of Spring

QIAO TIANYA LEANED BACK in the rattan chair. Several red threads were pressed between his lips, which he braided with deft fingers. The moonlight after midnight was a watery glow sliding over the bridge of his nose; his heavy-lidded eyes appeared rather lonely.

His qin rested on the table, covered with a silk brocade cloth. It hadn't been touched in days.

Yao Wenyu didn't make a sound as he opened his eyes and turned to look at Qiao Tianya.

Qiao Tianya was like the solitary, lonesome moon hovering above an empty valley after a rainstorm—clear and distant. That unbridled wind had turned into last night's dream, leaving only its shadow upon him. Yao Wenyu had kept the ball with its vibrant silk ribbons from the day of the horse race, but he understood he would never walk to that man's side to give it back.

Theirs was the ephemeral three months of spring that walked inexorably toward a quiet end, gone as soon as they'd begun.

Qiao Tianya took the red braid from between his lips and tied off the tail with a flourish. He reached for Yao Wenyu's hand and wrapped the finished cord around his wrist.

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Hidden behind the lowered drapes, Yuanzhuo peered through the gap at the man inches away. Silently, he started to laugh. Even as he did, dampness slowly spread on his pillow.

Qiao Tianya didn't lift the drapes. The mere contact of their fingers conveyed the warmth between them, as though this was the greatest intimacy they could manage; any closer, and it would vanish in a blink.

Through it all, Yao Wenyu never spoke, as if he had never woken up at all.

When Shen Zechuan arrived the next morning, Yao Wenyu was already up. He bent slightly toward Shen Zechuan in what was meant to be a bow.

"My sudden illness yesterday held up official business," Yao Wenyu said, picking up the mess of weiqi pieces on the board. "I wanted to finish my discussion with Your Lordship today, while I'm feeling well enough."

Shen Zechuan took a seat. "Your illness is only just starting to show improvement. You can rest half a month if you need to before continuing our discussion."

"I have nothing better to do while I'm sick." Yao Wenyu contemplated for a few moments, then continued. "The port in Liuzhou is a priority. Completing it will give us a seat at the discussion table in Juexi."

Yao Wenyu's considerations were different from those of Kong Ling and the others. He was much more farsighted, and in this current climate, as hostilities grew between Zhongbo and Qudu, he preferred to focus on collecting virtuous talents for Shen Zechuan than on killing the Zhou empire's officials.

"Your Lordship thinks you're lacking generals, but in my view, it's just the opposite." Yao Wenyu set each weiqi piece back in place. "In the future, the east will not want for fierce generals. Wu Ziyu, Tantai Hu—these are qualified generals capable of leading an army. Once the war is won, with them guarding the frontiers, Your Lordship will have nothing to worry about on the eastern front. What Your Lordship will need then are capable ministers and officials. As gifted as Chengfeng is, he's unwilling to leave

Zhongbo, and while Zhou Gui is loyal, he's not suited for any greater responsibilities. On the other hand, Juexi and its thirteen cities have for years survived without falling into the noble clans' clutches, precisely because the region has a capable minister: Jiang Qingshan.

"The real reason Xue Yanqing could make such headway in the imperial court is because of his supporters in the pragmatists' faction; the heir apparent was only his foot in the door. These supporters are not highly ranked, but they are key in deciding whether the reforms he wants are pushed through. They work in Juexi for the good of the people, and hope to revitalize the Li Clan's empire and bring back the glory days of Yongyi. They are scholars with far more boldness of vision than the capital's ministers, and are likely the last worthy officials of the Zhou empire."

The path to the top was difficult in more ways than one. A change of dynasty meant the lifelong dreams of innumerable scholars would be cut short. Even with the imperial court in such a state of decay, neither Hai Liangyi nor Xue Xiuzhuo had ever thought about replacing the Li Clan, because the mere suggestion was comparable to patricide. According to all the laws of society, the relationship between a ruler and his subjects was that of a father and his sons. The Li Clan had sat on the throne for centuries. It went deeper than just shouting *Long live Your Majesty* to the reigning ruler; it meant stability—generations of rulers and subjects upholding the official, legitimate lineage.

If—when—Shen Zechuan set foot in Qudu once again, what the prefectural governor would have to conquer was more than one man or woman, it was the legitimacy of the Son of Heaven seated tall and majestic on the dragon throne. He needed heaven to bestow him the right to slay the sovereign, or he would never escape the infamy of being labeled a treacherous subject.

Yet even the Mandate of Heaven was far from enough. He would need to convince the surviving officials who'd sworn themselves to the Li Clan to willingly put themselves at his disposal. Otherwise, even if he conquered this vast empire, he would never achieve the flourishing era of prosperity of which Qi Huilian had dreamed.

"Xue Yanqing's cleanup of the eight cities' fields should have been a great victory," Yao Wenyu continued, "but he was too hasty. The eight

cities' field taxes make up a significant portion of Qudu's tax revenue. Now that he has so thoroughly removed the Pan Clan of Dancheng, he's left with only two options. The first is to push ahead and investigate the remaining seven cities, resurveying the lands as fast as he can; the second is to slow down and give the remaining noble families a chance to make up tax arrears. If he goes through with the first option, the fields must be returned to the commoners—but those commoners have long since left their homes to scrape out a living in Zhongbo. Reorganizing the household registry of every city will hold up plowing and sowing this year. In that case, the problem of feeding the common folk in Qudu and the eight cities, Juexi, and Qidong this autumn will fall squarely on Juexi and Hezhou.

"If he chooses the second option, the responsibility of the field tax deficits will be spread between the eight cities, which undoubtedly means the noble clans will continue to pass the costs on to the commoners. Living under an unforgiving regime is no better than living with ferocious beasts. To the people, nothing will have changed.

"By the time the grain requisitions run Juexi into the ground, the commoners of the thirteen cities will have barely enough to keep their stomachs from growling. If Your Lordship uses the Port of Liuzhou as a foothold to develop an east-west waterway and build out the north-south road, Hezhou and Zhongbo will be able to alleviate Juexi's burden."

Sunlight slanted beneath the eaves. Holding a weiqi piece between his fingers, Yao Wenyu took a moment to catch his breath before continuing. "Your Lordship presumably had a plan in mind long before you decided to kill Yan Heru."

"Hezhou is right next to Qidong." Shen Zechuan set down his own piece. "If I don't take that land for my own, how can I sleep at night?"

Shen Zechuan had spoken bluntly. If Qi Zhuyin were to go all out to protect the Li Clan, then Dengzhou, so close to Qidong, would be Shen Zechuan's key vulnerability. He needed to control Hezhou, an even more important strategic point—only then would he be able to meet Qi Zhuyin at the table.

All Yan Heru had ever thought about was business, but Shen Zechuan had far more than business on his mind. Since Qi Zhuyin had joined forces with Xue Xiuzhuo in the Dancheng case, the heir apparent would surely

bestow a noble title upon her. Very soon, she would become a marquis of the Zhou empire. The garrison troops of the Qidong's five commanderies were situated just to the south of Zhongbo. Shen Zechuan had to choke off Qidong's route west, on which Hezhou was the waystation.

"Qi Shiyu is old. Qi Zhuyin was always Qidong's best choice for grand marshal," Shen Zechuan continued. "Lu Guangbai remains in Libei because he no longer wishes to be a general of the Zhou empire. Qi Zhuyin has had to mend the gap in the Bianjun Commandery herself. Qudu wants her to guard the throne, but even if she agrees, she has to be able to travel there."

Knowing Qi Zhuyin, perhaps she really could make it in time. That was why Shen Zechuan had to obstruct the roads by any means necessary.

"Marshal Qi has been greatly troubled by money in recent years. Her willingness to mobilize against the Qingshu tribe was her assessing her options," Yao Wenyu said amid a quiet coughing fit.

Shen Zechuan left the topic there. "Qiao Tianya has to lead the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry now. He's at the military training grounds all day, so it's to be expected that he has less time to keep you company. I wrote to Shifu and asked him to come to Duanzhou to take care of you."

Yao Wenyu didn't refuse, merely dabbing at his mouth with his handkerchief. "He's such a long way off. It must be a tiring journey to come all this way for me."

Shen Zechuan spotted the red bracelet on Yuanzhuo's wrist, hidden by his sleeve until he raised his hand, but didn't ask. Hunu, who had just woken up, brushed against the door as she padded over.

"Qudu was once your home," Shen Zechuan said. "Xi Hongxuan told me you always returned to the capital every spring. Next year…or perhaps in a few years, you can see the springtime scenery properly again."

Yao Wenyu knew this was Shen Zechuan's way of comforting him. He flashed him a small smile and changed the subject. "The Dancheng case is coming to a close. Where will Pan Lin be exiled to?"

Shen Zechuan lowered his folding fan to hold Hunu back. "Kong Qiu meant to send him to Huaizhou, but he went on a hunger strike at the Qudu relay station. He starved himself to death."

Yao Wenyu sat in silence for a long time.

Pan Lin had achieved success at a young age, and his career as an official had been smooth sailing. His heated words to Xue Xiuyi at the feast back then had turned out to be prophetic—he had starved to death. After being encumbered by his lineage all his life, he was finally free.

Yao Wenyu turned his gaze to the courtyard.

Qudu was indeed his former home. But there were no longer any sights worth going back for.

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Chapter 231:
Feints

THE DAY PAN LIN DIED, Li Jianting's condition finally stabilized. The maids and eunuchs in her palace had barely a moment to weep for joy before they were hauled off to the prison. Since the heir apparent had been poisoned, the Condiment Service that stocked the kitchens was promptly shut down for investigation, and all the eunuchs on duty were taken into custody. Fuman, given his seniority in the palace since the reign of the Tianchen Emperor, was placed in charge of this case and put the eunuchs through a ruthless interrogation.

"Lao-zuzong!" a junior eunuch cried as he sprawled over the bench, unable to stand the beating. "Please have mercy!"

Dressed in a python-patterned robe of a hundred pleats and wearing a round, black eunuch's hat, Fuman stood with his hands behind his back and studied the art on the wall.

The eunuchs holding the flogging rods were all old members of the Eastern Depot. Skilled in the art of flogging, they beat the eunuch until he was barely conscious.

"Mercy!" The junior eunuch choked with sobs.

Fuman looked back. "All of you were on duty when the heir was poisoned. If you want to live, you had better tell me everything."

These inner-palace eunuchs had taken up their posts after the Tianchen Emperor's time and had no experience with intrigue. None of them had any idea what the heir apparent had even been poisoned with; there was nothing they could tell.

"Think. What did the heir apparent eat and wear that day?" Fuman asked patiently. "There are so many people in the Condiment Service. Perhaps a few bad actors infiltrated your ranks. You've always been close with the others there, haven't you? So why can't you think of anything?"

The eunuch caught his hint, but he didn't dare speculate on where Fuman was leading him. He hemmed and hawed without saying a word.

Fuman flung his sleeves in exasperation at the eunuch's denseness, then ordered the old eunuch with the rod to continue the flogging. Blood saturated the young eunuch's mouth. Digging his fingers into the bench, he whimpered, "Stop, stop it! I'll tell you!"

Fuman ignored him.

The young eunuch gulped down blood. "The Condiment Service… and the Garden Service… There were new faces I didn't recognize…"

Only then did Fuman turn slightly and say, voice soft, "Did you speak to them?"

The eunuch shook his head hard, not daring to answer. He raised his eyes tentatively, trying to read Fuman's expression, then repeated in a small voice, "I didn't recognize them."

"If you didn't recognize them, how do you know which services they belong to?" Fuman asked patiently. "Someone must have told you, and that was how you knew."

"It was one wh-who stands guard at the door," the eunuch answered.

"Tch." Fuman bent down. "How can a guard like that get close to the heir apparent? The one who serves the heir most frequently is usually the one who knows the most."

The young eunuch didn't dare breathe too heavily as he followed Fuman's lead and answered, "Fengquan is usually the one serving…"

Fuman clapped softly. "There you go. That wasn't so hard, was it?"

With the case in Fuman's hands, the chances of identifying the true culprit were less than zero. In fact, the one who had planted people in Li Jianting's palace—at Han Cheng's instigation—was none other than himself. The poison had nothing to do with the Condiments Service; it lay in the chopsticks Li Jianting had eaten with that day. During the uproar that broke out when she collapsed, Fuman had gotten someone to replace the original chopsticks and clean up any traces.

Fuman stepped out of the interrogation hall. As he looked toward the courtyard's entrance, he spotted a sedan and its bearers waiting for him under a pagoda tree. The supervising officials from the Ministry of Justice

had already left. Fuman was on guard as he lifted the hem of his robe and strode forward with a smile on his face. “What distinguished person is looking for me? Send a message and I’ll be there—no need to come and invite me personally! Although, I do happen to have a case to attend to right now and can’t get away—”

The curtain on the sedan twitched aside, and Han Cheng’s sneering voice floated out. “It’s only been a few days since I saw you, and you’ve started to put on airs in front of me, you son of a bitch. What? I can’t order you around now?!”

This motherfucker!

Fuman bent obediently at the waist. “This humble servant thought it was those old fogeys from the Grand Secretariat. They’ve been sticking to me like glue while I investigate this case. They’re irritating to the extreme; I never expected it to be Your Excellency. But of course the moment this humble servant sees you, it’s as if—how should I put it? Like a baby sparrow seeking refuge in the woods!”

He played dumb, knowing Han Cheng was a sucker for mindless flattery.

Sure enough, Han Cheng brightened. He drew down the curtain and commanded, “Follow me.”

Fuman cursed under his breath as he walked behind the sedan, keeping his resentment pent up in his heart. When they arrived at their destination—Han Cheng’s private residence—he knew the man wanted to ask him about the heir apparent’s case. But the moment he stepped through the door, before he could even start toadying up to Han Cheng, the gleam of blades in the hands of Han Cheng’s men nearly blinded him. He forgot what he was going to say and dropped to his knees.

“Look at the guts on you.” Han Cheng poured tea for himself, but he didn’t tell Fuman to get up. “You thought yourself a second Pan Rugui? Are you even worthy?!”

“No, definitely not worthy!” Bracing himself against the ground, Fuman bent his mouth in an apologetic smile. “This humble servant is but a lowly slave. How could I compare to the lao-zuzong? I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Han Cheng set the teapot down. “I told you to poison Li Jianting. What did you give her?”

Fuman’s back was drenched in a cold sweat. He couldn’t hesitate—he recited what he’d rehearsed to himself countless times: “This humble servant did as Commander Han said and gave her Swift Pursuit.”

“How strange.” Han Cheng sneered. “A poison that can take out several strong men can’t even kill one woman.”

Fuman felt a chill at the back of his neck. Those were real blades, and by now they were pressing right against his skin. The muscles on his face twitched. He slapped himself and cried, “Such an accusation is a most terrible attack on my devotion! How could this humble servant dare plot with an outsider to harm a man I revere as my own father? Xue Yanqing, Kong Qiu, and the others detest eunuchs and order me around like livestock. I really did use Swift Pursuit. I even kept the chopsticks. I would never be sloppy.”

Fuman paused to wipe his tears. “I’m puzzled too. It’s truly mind-boggling. It was Swift Pursuit without a doubt, but the heir only threw up a few times, that’s all. If that’s not absurd, I don’t know what is!”

Han Cheng was livid. Li Jianting’s life and death directly affected his plans. He’d deployed the Eight Great Battalions on the gamble that the heir apparent would die that night, but to everyone’s surprise, Li Jianting had pulled through. The Dancheng case was still open, and Xue Xiuzhuo intended to continue investigating. Now that the Pan Clan was gone, next on the chopping block would be the Helian Marquis’s Fei Clan. Everyone from the remaining seven cities was in danger.

“Have you mentioned the poisoning to anyone else?”

“I wouldn’t dare!” Fuman gasped.

“That better be true!” Han Cheng flung away the teacup in his hand. “You’re the one who botched this, so clean it up! None of the people you placed in her palace can be allowed to live. Use this opportunity to dispose of them all.”

Had Li Jianting been poisoned with Swift Pursuit, she would be in her grave now. Either someone had intercepted and swapped the poison, or Fuman had never poisoned her with Swift Pursuit in the first place.

Regardless, the people serving her in her bedchamber were all loose ends. It was very possible someone else had slipped their people in.

Han Cheng knew eunuchs were a crafty lot. These castrated vermin were second to none at trimming their sails and going wherever the wind blew. Fuman was no different. Now that the noble clans had taken a hit, there was no guarantee Fuman wouldn't get any funny ideas. Keeping him around any longer was asking for trouble. Han Cheng was suspicious by nature, and by now he was like a hunted bird startled by the mere twang of a bow. He stood and glared at Fuman, then took a few steps toward the eunuch, ready to end him on the spot.

Sensing that his head was in imminent danger of parting from his shoulders, Fuman cried out in desperation, "The Grand Secretary! He personally ordered me to investigate the case—there's still a chance to turn things around! Don't worry, Commander, I'll clean this up properly! The supervising officials from the Ministry of Justice are all familiar with me. If anything goes awry, I'll come to you with my own head on a platter!"

Unfortunately, Han Cheng still needed him, at least until the investigation was complete. Taking in Fuman's ghastly pallor and his useless cringing, he merely said, "Mess up again, and the empress dowager will be the one who takes your head, even if I want to save you. You want to be top eunuch, but you're not there yet!"

Fuman concurred, his heart in his mouth.

While gray clouds and misty rain dominated the sky for days on end in Qudu, sun shone down on the front lines of the north. On Xiao Jiming's orders, the commanding generals of Libei now rotated through the three Sand Camps. Today, it was Xiao Chiye's turn at First Sand Camp. Lu Guangbai stepped out of his tent to receive him, and Xiao Chiye removed his helmet in greeting before tossing it over so he could dismount.

Lu Guangbai jumped to catch Xiao Chiye's helmet and saw the large dent on it. "Hassen's much better than we are at playing with catapults."

Xiao Chiye handed his reins to Chen Yang and removed his armguard. "They destroyed Second Sand Camp's watchtower yesterday.

Better send someone to Shifu—have him dispatch craftsmen over there to repair it."

"Jiming only just sent a group of craftsmen this way. If it's urgent, we can send the craftsmen at Border Camp up for now." Lu Guangbai handed the helmet to Chen Yang. "The wall of Third Sand Camp was repaired only to collapse again. Qianqiu-shifu can't spare you any men."

Xiao Chiye's skin had tanned from exposure in recent months. Watching Meng circle over the camp, he said, "The Biansha Horsemen's numbers are increasing."

After Xiao Chiye took out the Duanzhou Scorpions, Hassen had started to intensify his attacks. It was glaringly obvious by the third month. Hassen was frantically assembling men in the east, and the Biansha Horsemen's numbers were skyrocketing. Last year, the horsemen could only launch an assault with one main force while the rest of their soldiers carried out smaller-scale sneak attacks. Now, Hassen could split his forces to launch full-scale attacks on two camps at the same time.

"Amur sent Hassen north, but he didn't go south himself—he went east," Lu Guangbai said. "He wants to expand his territory deep into the desert and bring the remaining six tribes under his rule as soon as possible. It's likely Amur's newly acquired forces are giving Hassen the numbers to launch simultaneous attacks."

Xiao Chiye wiped the dust from his cheeks with a pensive expression.

"But Hassen has been uneven on the battlefield as of late," Lu Guangbai observed.

Xiao Chiye had been the one to personally kill Achi, the leader of the Scorpions in Duanzhou. Hassen had assumed that, after returning to the front lines, Xiao Chiye would lead his new armored cavalry out of the camps and onto the battlefield. Instead, Xiao Chiye had stayed well out of reach. Hassen had been given no opportunity to come face to face with Libei's newly equipped forces. It was as if they had swapped places. An unknown danger was one that couldn't be forestalled or countered. As long as the capabilities of Xiao Chiye's new cavalry remained a mystery, Hassen couldn't call the shots.

“The battles Hassen fought on both the northern and southern battlefields were all ones he was sure he could win.” Xiao Chiye absently turned his thumb ring. “And his victories are owed in part to his familiarity with our commanding generals.”

The exhilarating battle Qi Zhuyin had fought at First Sand Camp was proof of the strategic value of unpredictability. Xiao Jiming had seen this, which was why he had shuffled the commanding generals on the front line. Only when Hassen met with the Libei Armored Cavalry again did he realize what Xiao Jiming had done.

Xiao Jiming was the kind of commander in chief Hassen disliked most. Even when he couldn’t keep up with the enemy’s pace, he never got flustered—he always seemed to maintain his composure. This was both Xiao Jiming’s character and his style of conducting war. He understood he couldn’t beat Hassen head-to-head, so he never thought of besting Hassen on the battlefield itself. Instead, he had spent the last few months slowing Libei’s rhythm. The armored cavalry was in the process of recovery; even if they couldn’t win every skirmish, they wouldn’t let Hassen lead them around by the nose as they had before.

“Even Hassen is bound to get impatient when he’s so close to his goal,” Xiao Chiye said thoughtfully. “After all, he’s also anxious for victory.”

Xiao Jiming wanted to give this opportunity to Xiao Chiye.

Lu Guangbai looked at Xiao Chiye. “Amur has invested all of his efforts into Hassen. The outcome of his son’s battles is a matter of Amur’s dignity in the face of the other tribes. If Hassen can’t win, then Amur cannot become the future great king of the Twelve Tribes.”

Xiao Chiye didn’t care why Hassen wanted to win; he only cared to claim Hassen’s head.

Lu Guangbai seemed to understand this, so he didn’t belabor the point. Instead he said, “Another source of Hassen’s apprehension is the south. Now that Marshal Qi’s fighting the Qingshu tribe, they’re facing pressure from both directions.”

But was Hassen genuinely anxious over the northern and southern battlefields?

Xiao Chiye felt that there was more to Hassen's recent onslaughts—that perhaps they were a diversion to disguise his real target. Instead of fighting wars of attrition on two fronts, dragging things out indefinitely, the most strategic place to attack was Zhongbo.

Hassen was good at feints. Xiao Chiye kept his eyes fixed on every move his enemy made. His understanding of Hassen had already far exceeded Hassen's understanding of him; he stalked him now like a wolf in the dark.

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Chapter 232:
Snowmelt Flood

"IF I'M HASSEN," Xiao Chiye said as he squatted and sketched a simple map in the sand, "My best bet is to attack Duanzhou."

Shen Zechuan had severed Amur's supply route through Duanzhou, so the burden of Hassen's military provisions was now entirely borne by the six desert tribes. Amur had allowed Hassen to marry Dorlan at the beginning of this year precisely because he needed her Hulu tribe to supply food to the front lines. Since the sixth month last year, the Biansha Horsemen hadn't been able to cross into the Zhou empire to pillage. This was the true source of Hassen's anxiety.

"In that case, you'll have to think carefully," Lu Guangbai said, falling into his new role. He crouched, too, and placed a stone on top of the Duanzhou Xiao Chiye had marked in sand. "If you launch a surprise attack on Duanzhou, Shen Zechuan will mobilize Tantai Hu, who's currently stationed in Dunzhou, to engage in a fierce battle with you. While you're tied down, he'll call for reinforcements from the Bianjun Commandery and Third Sand Camp, and their troops will trap you in Duanzhou, never to return."

"I can run." Xiao Chiye drew a circle around the stone with his finger. "I have the faster cavalry. The goal is not to take Duanzhou, but to loot their granaries. I can even raid the newly built stables on Mount Luo on the way back. The reinforcements from the north and south won't be able to catch up to me."

"You're forgetting Marshal Qi," Lu Guangbai said. "When you leave the front line, the marshal will go east to Gedal and kick you in the ass."

"That's exactly what I want." Xiao Chiye rolled the stone toward the Bianjun Commandery. "If Marshal Qi goes to Gedal, I'll give the Qingshu tribe's territory to the Youxiong tribe and let the Youxiong tribe cut off her retreat. She'll be trapped in Gedal, and we can destroy her in one fell swoop."

Lu Guangbai blocked the stone with the back of his hand. “Marshal Qi won’t dare to penetrate deep into enemy territory with such a small force unless she has reinforcements. She can transfer the Cangjun Commandery Garrison Troops to the Bianjun Commandery. When the Youxiong tribe tries to block her path, the Cangjun troops will be in position to hit them back. Besides, the Youxiong tribe has yet to pledge allegiance to Amur. They might not be willing to step forward as your shields.”

“They will,” Xiao Chiye argued. “The Youxiong tribe refused to submit to Amur because the Qingshu tribe was a bulwark between them and the Qidong Garrison Troops. Once the Qingshu tribe’s been wiped out, the Youxiong tribe won’t be able to hold their own against her next round of attacks. They’ll have to pledge allegiance to Amur if they want reinforcements from us.”

Lu Guangbai hesitated for a moment. He put the stone back on Duanzhou, resetting the map. “Okay, let’s say I can’t count on Marshal Qi’s reinforcements from the south. I’ll still put more men in the north at Mount Luo to guard against you.”

“When I attack, I’ll destroy the road between Mount Luo to Duanzhou,” Xiao Chiye said. “Without the road, your reinforcements will be stuck. You’ll have no choice but to run in circles on Mount Luo while my cavalry rides off.”

Lu Guangbai pushed the stone along the sand. “You have to cross the Chashi River on your return journey. I’ll lie in ambush along the banks.”

“Even if you whittle down my military strength at the banks of the Chashi River,” Xiao Chiye said, raising his eyes, “I’ll have already achieved my goal.”

Lu Guangbai touched a finger to the bridge of his nose and barked out a wry laugh. “Ruthless.”

The land along the banks of the Chashi River was all desert and barren fields. The ambushes Lu Guangbai excelled at relied heavily on the terrain. He had no advantage at the Chashi River. His war chariot battle formation might be able to withstand attacks from a cavalry, but it couldn’t give chase. Lu Guangbai wouldn’t be able to catch up to Hassen’s forces.

If Xiao Chiye's guess was correct and Hassen really did move on Duanzhou in a surprise attack, not only would Hassen be able to obtain the supplies he needed, he could also set up new obstructions for Qi Zhuyin in the south, thereby relieving himself of the pressure of two battlefronts.

Xiao Chiye spread his fingers and covered the map with his hand. "Hassen still has eyes in Qudu. He can see the whole game board."

As twilight closed in on all sides, cooking smoke began to rise from the camp. Lu Guangbai sat on the ground and weighed the stone in his palm as he watched warm orange light wash over the camp walls. Under the lingering glow of the sun, he said, "But you can't get away."

Hassen was launching new offensives on the front line every day; they were all tied down here, unable to spare any thought for Zhongbo to the south.

"A fierce offense means he's starting to run out of food." Xiao Chiye peered at the map between his fingers. "If he can't hold the armored cavalry here, he'll lose a portion of his elite troops in Duanzhou."

Hassen was trying to lock down Libei's main forces at the three camps along the front line. Only once his enemies were completely worn down could he afford to send his elite forces to mount an attack on Duanzhou. If Libei was too exhausted to respond, then the threat posed by any reinforcements would be much smaller. It would be the optimal time to attack.

Lu Guangbai tossed the stone to Xiao Chiye. "This is an opportunity we can exploit."

A surprise attack would no longer be so threatening if they could see through Hassen's motives. Hassen could feint, but so could the Libei Armored Cavalry. Fighting a war of attrition was detrimental to both parties, but Xiao Chiye was more confident of success—unlike Hassen, he had Shen Zechuan to supply his provisions.

To date, the only one of them who posed a true threat to Amur in this war was Shen Zechuan: His supply route was the web that kept the eastern territories of Libei, Zhongbo, and Qidong secure and unassailable.

"We'll tie him up here till the end of the sixth month." Xiao Chiye took the stone and tossed it into the middle of the scrawled map. "I'll lead

the elite troops from Second Sand Camp to Bianjun. You and Shifu pretend to tire under Hassen's attacks. As soon as he backs off here, that will be the signal that he's about to attack Duanzhou, where I'll be waiting for him."

Three months was just right. Hassen would dispatch his troops at the height of summer, when the granaries were full. If provisions were his goal, he couldn't afford to pass up such an opportunity.

By now, the horizon had darkened. Xiao Chiye stood and whistled toward the sky. Wings flapping, Meng circled once before landing on Xiao Chiye's shoulder. Lu Guangbai patted dust off his robe as he stood, and the two walked side by side to the tent.

Chen Yang was waiting at the entrance to lift the flap for them. As Xiao Chiye ducked to enter, he whispered, "Master, letters from the governor and Gu Jin have both arrived."

Xiao Chiye took the letters and stopped at the entrance to read them.

Lu Guangbai drank half a bowl of milk tea while he waited. After a long time without any sound from the entrance of the tent, he looked back at Xiao Chiye, only to see him standing perfectly still, his expression dark.

Several days later, Fuman was summoned to the office of the Grand Secretariat. He removed his damp outer layer and gathered up his robe before walking in and bowing to Kong Qiu.

Kong Qiu, sitting by the window, made a sound of acknowledgment and gestured for Fuman to rise. Fuman gingerly straightened and stood in wait at the far end of the room, behind the rest of the ministers. His lowered eyes swept across the black boots beside him. He recognized most of the officials present.

"—and the spring plowing has just ended. Huaizhou bought grain from Baimazhou. Jiang Qingshan sold it to them, calculating its cost based on the price of grain in Juexi," Liang Cuishan said, finishing his report.

Kong Qiu's hair had begun to go white in recent days, though not yet enough to be seen from under his official's hat. "Qidong is fighting a war now. They have priority for military funds. The Eight Great Battalions' expenses can be reduced accordingly."

Here it comes, thought Fuman. If the Grand Secretariat wanted to keep digging into the accounts of the eight cities, they had to first pare down Han Cheng's power.

"The Ministry of War agrees." Chen Zhen, the Minister of War, tapped his pipe. "But Han Cheng has refused to let go of the funds. He wants a writ from the Grand Secretariat."

"What he wants is a signed acknowledgment from the throne," Cen Yu said. "The Dancheng case has yet to conclude, and to avoid any appearance of bias, the empress dowager can't sign off on it. The Grand Secretariat is in agreement on this matter, or we wouldn't have brought it up with him. But look at him, daring this shameless refusal."

The empress dowager was just barely hanging on herself, never mind maintaining enough authority to approve memorials. The whole Hua Clan was on tenterhooks. How had the heir apparent been poisoned? Everyone knew all too well. Handing the poisoning case to Fuman and the inner court was Kong Qiu's magnanimous gesture to preserve the last shred of the empress dowager's dignity.

Still, Han Cheng refused to budge from his post as the head of the Embroidered Uniform Guard and the de facto commander of the Eight Great Battalions. He meant to follow in Hua Siqian's footsteps, relying on military might to challenge the Grand Secretariat.

Fuman had been buttering his bread on both sides, all for this very moment. If Han Cheng cast him out, he could still jump onto the Grand Secretariat's ship. He had made a point to appear frequently before Hai Liangyi, and had spent the longest time of any of the inner-palace eunuchs in the Grand Secretariat's office compound. The junior eunuchs' address of Lao-zuzong—*old ancestor*—was not casually given; his orders carried real weight among them. He'd been keeping such a tight grip on the heir's case not only because he wanted to cleanly extricate himself from any suspicion, but also because he hoped to make Fengquan the scapegoat.

The Tianchen Emperor had favored his concubine Mu Ru, incurring the displeasure of the Grand Secretariat when he promoted her brother, Fengquan, against the palace rules. Even the Chief Surveillance Bureau had censured him for it at the time. Later, when the Tianchen Emperor died at

Mu Ru's hands, it was only through Xue Xiuzhuo's grace that Fengquan continued to drag out his ignoble existence.

Fuman didn't dare court the wrath of Xue Xiuzhuo. But he could see as well as any that the heir apparent was the future master of their Great Zhou. He had to knock Fengquan out of the game before he could claim a spot at the heir's side. If Fuman could insert himself there instead, he could count on the heir for a life of wealth and glory to come.

As for Han Cheng and Kong Qiu, Fuman didn't think much of either of them. He couldn't help but remember Pan Rugui, who'd so deftly corralled the Pan faction and sat on equal footing with Hua Siqian—achievements only possible due to the Guangcheng Emperor's trust in him. It wasn't easy being a eunuch, having to be ordered about like a dog. But if one found the right master, he could be a dog that lorded over millions—a dog that everyone had to deferentially address as *Zuzong*.

Fuman sensed Kong Qiu looking at him. He shook off his distraction and stepped forward to bow, a complete turnabout from his attitude in front of Han Cheng. He said deferentially, "This humble servant has thoroughly investigated the matter as Your Excellency ordered. The seasonal vegetables consumed by the heir apparent that day were sourced by our Garden Service."

"Aren't those exclusively supplied to the palace?" Kong Qiu asked. "Who is the eunuch in charge there?"

"Someone called Yinzhu." Fuman continued, "I've carefully interrogated everyone in the heir's palace. None of them has any ties to the Garden Service. The rules in the palace are strict; they wouldn't normally cross paths."

"Poison made its way into the vegetables of the Garden Service, yet they could pass through so many hands to be served to the heir. Such a plot wouldn't be possible without careful planning." As the head of the Ministry of Justice, Kong Qiu's deductions were clear and organized. "The perpetrator must be both capable and have a clear grasp of the heir's preferences—something that would take at least half a year of effort."

Fuman murmured in agreement. "This humble servant did in fact find such a person."

Kong Qiu traded a glance with Cen Yu. “Who?”

Fuman hesitated for a moment. “Fengquan.”

Fengquan had once held the position of the Director of the Seal at the Directorate of Ceremonial Affairs. The Garden Service had been under his jurisdiction and was tied closely to the Directorate for Culinary Arts, which prepared the palace’s meals. Not only was he the heir apparent’s personal attendant, he was also someone the empress dowager had insisted on saving. Compared to a universal flatterer like Fuman, who fawned over everyone he came across, Fengquan was more guarded; he couldn’t be cleared of suspicion at all.

Kong Qiu furrowed his brow. “The eunuch who served the Tianchen Emperor? Isn’t he already dead?”

“One would think,” Fuman agreed softly. “But somehow he’s been by the heir apparent’s side for over half a year. He looks different now, so much so that this humble servant didn’t recognize him when he came with the heir apparent to Mingli Hall.”

Kong Qiu mulled over this news. The room had lapsed into silence when the announcement of Xue Xiuzhuo’s arrival came from the main entrance. Liang Cuishan hadn’t made it this far without learning to preserve his own life: These matters of the inner court concerned the heir apparent and were not his to meddle in. He took the opportunity to stand and retreated from the room just as Xue Xiuzhuo entered.

Xue Xiuzhuo’s official’s hat was slightly damp from the rain. When he spotted Fuman standing at the side of the room, he didn’t ask about it. He bowed to Kong Qiu, who made no more mention of Fengquan as he bade Xue Xiuzhuo to take a seat.

As the Chashi River thawed, the warmth of spring in Duanzhou turned into an endless drizzle that misted the air for days. The rain pelted the peach blossoms in the courtyard until fallen petals covered the ground in a wet blanket of red. Shen Zechuan met with his advisors in the hall daily, usually sitting for several hours at a time, so Fei Sheng added a charcoal brazier to dispel the cold.

"Now that Yan Heru's disappeared, the businesses in Hezhou are a mess." Yu Xiaozai sat just below Kong Ling, near the charcoal brazier. "The merchants are in an uproar for fear that the deals they made with him at the start of the year will fall through. They came to Chazhou in hope of discussing it with Your Lordship. We also have to send someone to the port as soon as possible to liaise with the local yamen."

Yao Wenyu seemed a bit better today; he steadily answered, "The spring plowing has just ended, which will free up some personnel from our yamen in the other prefectures. And there's Wang Xian in Chazhou, who is familiar with matters of taxation. There's no need for Your Lordship to meet them in person."

"Whatever deals were made in the past, we'll honor them," Shen Zechuan said, holding a hand warmer between his palms. "Wang Xian can handle it."

Wang Xian had once been the Secretary of the Ministry of Revenue, where his job was contending with the various ministries that requested funds. Even Xiao Chiye had hit a brick wall when it came to him. There was no one more suitable than this man to negotiate with the merchants.

"The Yan Clan was the one greasing the wheels with the Liuzhou prefect. Talk to them—ask them if they can locate Yan Heru. If they cannot," Shen Zechuan continued, turning over the document, "tell them to hurry up and send someone capable of taking over his responsibilities."

Qi Zhuyin was still in Qudu, but the Yan Clan was slated to complete the delivery of the remaining military provisions to Qidong in the fourth month. No one would ever find Yan Heru again; at present, his successors in the Yan estate were likely fighting like cats and dogs. Shen Zechuan merely intended to drop them a reminder to hand over the grain they owed him before they got distracted dividing the properties and splitting the family.

With that, official matters concluded for the day. Observing that Qiao Tianya had yet to return from the drill ground, Shen Zechuan turned to Yu Xiaozai. "Youjing, you mentioned that the workings of each prefectural yamen are complicated and particular to their own region. Why don't you prepare a report for me? Follow Shenwei's example: Keep it brief and to the point." To Yao Wenyu, he said, "Shifu is in my courtyard today. Stay and take your meal with me, Yuanzhuo."

The advisors stood one after another and bowed to the prefectural governor before taking their leave.

Ji Gang was sitting under the eaves, watching Ding Tao practice his boxing. As soon as he saw the advisors coming out, he sent Ding Tao to instruct the kitchen to prepare the dishes. Remembering Fei Sheng's orders, Ding Tao left Li Xiong in the courtyard to protect the prefectural governor while he flew down the steps and dashed off to deliver the message.

Qiao Tianya had always been the one pushing Yao Wenyu's wheelchair, but these days, Ji Gang had taken over the job. By the time Qiao Tianya returned, it was dark.

Ding Tao and Li Xiong stood on each side of the entrance like a pair of guardian door gods. Arms folded, Ding Tao said to Qiao Tianya with cool detachment, "If His Lordship hasn't summoned you, you can't ent—"

Qiao Tianya shoved Ding Tao's head down and lifted the hanging screen to peer inside.

"He's already left!" Ding Tao wriggled free. "After the meal, His Lordship asked Grandpa Ji to wheel him back."

"You should have said so earlier. Where's the governor?"

"Getting ready for bed," Ding Tao answered. "He's in the bath now."

"You didn't even get someone to close the windows in the hall. The wind's freezing at night." Qiao Tianya eyed Ding Tao. "If the governor catches a cold, when Old Fei comes back, he's gonna scold you until dawn."

Ding Tao had indeed forgotten, but immediately protested anyway. "No! I remembered! I was just about to close them!" At once, he scampered into the hall to close the windows one at a time. As he retreated, he bumped the back of his head against something hard. Thinking Fei Sheng had returned, he hastily covered his head with his hands. But when he looked back to begin defending himself, he flinched and clamped his mouth shut.

Xiao Chiye lowered Wolfsfang, having stopped Ding Tao with his scabbard, and craned his neck as he searched for Shen Zechuan. His face was damp with rain and sweat. He'd yet to remove his heavy armor, and his boots were splattered with mud.

He had rushed here straight from the battlefield.

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Chapter 233:
To Love and to Fear

THE RAIN WAS STILL FALLING when Shen Zechuan returned from the bath. In a wide-sleeved robe but without his wooden clogs, he padded barefoot down the corridor leading to his bedchamber. Thunder rumbled overhead. The humid breeze pressed against his face even through the newly fitted window gauze, while the staccato sound of rain dispelled the stifled feeling Shen Zechuan had from sitting too long.

Candlesticks lined the sides of the covered walkway, making it more brightly illuminated than the bedchamber itself. Shen Zechuan lingered there, as if hoping for a fresh breeze. Shadows stretched through the bamboo blinds and onto the rug in the bedchamber, while the orange glow of the candlelight illuminated his profile, painting one side of his neck a warm and vivid red.

The fourth month was the season when crop seedlings sprouted and grew. If this bout of rain persisted, Duanzhou's fields near the Chashi River might end up inundated by a spring flood. Shen Zechuan had given Kong Ling instructions to see to Duanzhou's dams last month, but he had forgotten to follow up about it today. Reckoning Fei Sheng should be back by now, Shen Zechuan lifted the blinds and searched the bedchamber for the wooden clogs he had kicked off, preparing to summon him for a report.

Xiao Chiye had long since removed his armor and was lying sleepily on the bed with his head pillowed on his arms. Hearing movement, he rolled over; just as Lanzhou picked up his clogs, he brushed the bed-curtain aside and poked his head out.

Shen Zechuan jumped and dropped the wooden clogs.

Still holding the curtain, Xiao Chiye asked, "Is it true about the venerable master?"

Shen Zechuan schooled his expression and nodded.

Xiao Chiye's heart, which had been suspended the entire way here, plummeted completely into the abyss. He fell back onto the bedding with

his arms spread, looking as if he was ready to go to his death.

Bracing his hand against the edge of the bed, Shen Zechuan looked tentatively down at Xiao Chiye. “Did you rush all the way back here for this?”

In his search for Yideng, Xiao Chiye had scoured every inch of Libei and watched attentively as Xiao Jiming wrote more than a dozen letters to the venerable master. Now the man was gone before he’d even seen him. After a long silence, he asked, “And Yan Heru?”

Shen Zechuan drew a finger sharply across his neck.

Xiao Chiye fell silent, his face frosty and grave. He suddenly turned and buried his face in the pillow, refusing to look at Shen Zechuan. If he’d had a tail, it would be drooping on the ground. “We’ll look for physicians in Juexi,” he said into the pillow. “And there’s still the Imperial Academy of Medicine in Qudu.”

Shen Zechuan didn’t say a word. He laid an icy hand upon Xiao Chiye’s neck and slid up to stroke his cheek. Xiao Chiye caught hold of those slender fingers and gripped them fiercely. The rain seemed to extinguish his wrath, leaving only despair and panic in its wake. He attempted to calm himself, but those feelings roiled in his chest.

“Ce’an,” Shen Zechuan called.

“There are countless skilled physicians living in seclusion or retirement,” Xiao Chiye went on. “We’ll find as many as we can. Every last one. Then we’ll—”

Shen Zechuan withdrew his fingers. Feeling his palm empty, Xiao Chiye tried to sit up, but Shen Zechuan splayed his hand on Xiao Chiye’s back and pushed him down.

“A-Ye,” he said, leaning down with his hand still pressing on Xiao Chiye, unusually forceful. “You heard what Qianqiu-shifu said before. Even with Master Yideng, I might never be completely rid of my illness. But—this body is not so bad yet.” He gentled his tone. “I’ve been taking my medicine on time, and I haven’t fallen sick this year.”

The muscles of Xiao Chiye’s back were tense.

Shen Zechuan knocked his head against the back of Xiao Chiye's shoulder. Softly, he said, "I'm not going to leave you."

The rain outside the room pattered down, a chorus of finely woven beats. Xiao Chiye's chest felt hollowed, like a damp and clammy cave. Through the layers of fabric, Shen Zechuan pressed his cheek against Xiao Chiye's tattoo, right over the scar.

"You're lying to me," Xiao Chiye answered in the same soft voice.

He had once thought Xiao Fangxu would never leave him, but their parting had come with such haste that he hadn't even had a chance to bid his old man farewell. There existed a hidden boundary between people: Cross that line, and it was a parting by death. The other side was a world into which one could never give chase.

"You gave your life to the grand mentor." Xiao Chiye's voice sounded muffled and heavy in the darkness. "You vowed to kill his mortal enemies, and you stood alone before the noble clans without fear. Back in Qudu, you told me to leave you, and then you hurt yourself in Chazhou and Dunzhou."

Those two incidents had left behind a dormant fuse in Xiao Chiye's heart, igniting and expanding to unbearable proportions after Xiao Fangxu's demise. He felt fresh fear every time he thought of it, even so long after the fact. His terror and panic came not only from Shen Zechuan's fragile health, but from Shen Zechuan himself.

"Lanzhou, all you'd have to do is harden your heart, and you'd be able to leave me behind."

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Chapter 234:
Nobody

RAINDROPS DRUMMED against the eaves, an extension of Shen Zechuan's mood. He could bare himself in front of Xiao Chiye and show a hundred lustful glances, but he still found it hard to verbally express any softness and openness. He was the most eloquent orator in the world, and also the most inarticulate one.

"I gave this life to Xiansheng once because I had no place in this world to call my own. A-Ye, when I first stood before the halls of Qudu, what I saw was a door. Walk through it, and never again would Duanzhou be my hometown. My elder brother would vanish into my dreams, and no one in this world would ever forgive me."

That year, Shen Zechuan hadn't ridden into battle against their enemies, nor had he sat high in the imperial court a thousand miles away—he was an ordinary boy who'd come face to face with the scimitars. And it was precisely because he was ordinary that the wails of the six prefectures pierced his eardrums night after night, and the bloodbath in the sinkhole flooded his mind every waking moment. He had knelt in the raging snowstorm and experienced a separation of life and death, and had become the enemy of the entire world overnight.

He hadn't done anything, yet he was guilty. His sin went by the name Shen Zechuan.

He had watched the Biansha Horsemen massacre Duanzhou. Thirty thousand lives weighed him down, but because he had survived, he was forever held captive there. His struggles were insignificant. His anguished cries were worthless before thirty thousand corpses.

Back then, Shen Zechuan couldn't bear to live on.

He had been, among all the giants vying for power, a mere ant—a nobody. His pain was no more than a puff of dust stirred by the others' coughs. The moment he understood this, he'd lost the will to continue. Ji Mu had told him to live, but with the heroes and the sycophants still tearing

at each other's throats, he knew he would only be reduced to a pawn again. Dragging out his miserable existence would be no more than a waiting game before death claimed him to begin the next cycle of reincarnation.

Back in the derelict Temple of Guilt, Qi Huilian had raised his arms like a madman and cried out for the crown prince, but there was no longer any crown prince of this empire. Were the precious bloodlines of the noble clans the only hands that could touch the puppet strings that pulled the world? Were those distinguished, heaven-blessed lineages the only ones worthy to call down a storm that shook the realm? If that was so, then all the innumerable ordinary folk in the world could only be the rotting bones at the bottom of the palace steps. They were ants meant to be trampled on; they felt no pain, and they knew not how to voice their anguish. They were nobodies.

What crime did we commit? Qi Huilian had cried with inconsolable grief.

What crime did we commit?

Shen Zechuan had once caught Xiao Chiye by the collar in a filthy alley, ripping open his mask of forbearance to ask those same words, his voice breaking.

You and I, what did we do wrong?

If being alive was his sin, then the heavens themselves were pinning his head to the dirt so he could kneel and live on as a nobody. But Shen Zechuan had met Qi Huilian. He had seen the grand mentor's madness and listened as the lone crow let loose a mourning caw. He'd been forced to the precipice. If he couldn't muster the courage to burn the bridge and fight to the end, then he would have to venture down the path fate had laid out for him and kill himself once more.

I am Qi Huilian of Yuzhou. I taught the crown prince, and now…now I will teach you! I will impart my lifetime of knowledge, all of it, to you—what do you say?

What Shen Zechuan had seen then was a chance for him to live. Not just a way to rise up on his knees and catch his breath, but one where he could stand on his own two feet and move forward. Was victory assured just because one was born the descendant of a noble clan? The moment Qi

Huilian knelt before him, the world shifted. He had broken down that wall before anyone else, even Shen Zechuan himself.

Qi Huilian was a teacher of emperors; he would only teach someone who walked that path. He'd extended his hand to Shen Zechuan not just because he had no other choice. In fact, this was the most insane and ambitious of the grand mentor's schemes.

If Xiansheng will be my scroll, I will be his sword.

Shen Zechuan's hatred had been scattered across the whole of Qudu, a sea of faint, innumerable sparks. It was Qi Huilian who converged them into the flame called *enemy*.

Serene is the orchid that grows on palace steps; boundless the horizon of the boat that crosses the sea of misery.

Qi Huilian had forged Shen Lanzhou into what he was, sheathing his sharpest edges in patience. He had wanted to erase all the self-hatred that had kept Shen Zechuan clinging to life. He wanted to right Shen Zechuan's path, so that he could see himself truly and clearly.

Xue Xiuzhuo wasn't wrong in his thinking; he was simply too late. Qi Huilian had already found his heir to the throne.

Rain washed over the eaves. Shen Zechuan had fallen silent. He buried his face in Xiao Chiye's back, just as Xiao Chiye had buried his into the pillow.

Shen Zechuan didn't value his life; death didn't scare him. The hooves of the riders hunting the deer didn't skirt around anything. All the most peaceful oases in the world were built upon the sharpest blades. If Shen Zechuan died, it only proved he'd lost this game for the throne. It was insignificant.

Would a cut hand hurt?

For Shen Zechuan, he had to be cut first before he could answer. Qi Huilian hadn't managed to tether him to life. He was still a blade without a hilt, one that drew blood whenever it was held. No one else in the world could wield him. He had walked away from everything, all to achieve his goal: freedom.

He had felt free as he killed Ji Lei.

With that, Qi Huilian had realized for the first time that while he might have honed Shen Zechuan, he had not sheathed him. Shen Zechuan had only learned how to strike a silent, fatal blow.

When Shen Zechuan had made love to Xiao Chiye that first time, his battered, scarred body had finally experienced pleasure—the joy of being alive. Even he hadn't realized at the time that it was a prelude to the blade's return home.

This squall from Libei had scoured away Shen Zechuan's nightmares. Xiao Chiye had invaded Shen Zechuan's heart and dominated it. His strong arms blocked out all the din. Without invitation, he crashed his way into the deepest recesses of that quagmire to sniff at the exquisite gem therein.

He was the avaricious wolf.

"Xiansheng returned this life to me, A-Ye." Shen Zechuan melted into that familiar smell and nuzzled his cheek against Xiao Chiye's back like a fox cub who'd followed a scent. "A-Ye…"

Xiao Chiye reached back to hold Shen Zechuan in place, then turned his head, seeking his eyes.

Shen Zechuan's eyes were open, the look in them sincere. He inched Xiao Chiye's face closer with his fingertips and said, "I am yours, even in death. And you are mine." Then, revealing the ruthless edge of that blade, he continued, "If anyone tries to take you from me, I'll kill them."

Even if it were the King of Hell.

At first, Shen Zechuan thought what he cherished was not his own life but Xiao Chiye. Gradually, he came to learn that a cut finger would hurt—but it wasn't his finger that felt the pain; it was Xiao Chiye. Living was difficult, but in the process, he discovered yet more reasons to do so. He lived for Ji Mu, for Qi Huilian, for Zhongbo, for all of the nobodies in this tempestuous storm.

"I want to live to a ripe old age with you." Shen Zechuan dropped a light kiss on Xiao Chiye's temple. "In a place no one else can reach."

Xiao Chiye caught Shen Zechuan's hand again and rolled over to gather him into his arms. Cupping Shen Zechuan's cheeks, he leaned in and studied him closely.

“Tired from the ride?” Shen Zechuan asked quietly.

“Nope.” Xiao Chiye caressed Shen Zechuan’s cheeks. “I get through the days by thinking about you.”

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Chapter 235:
Scoundrel

ALTHOUGH XIAO CHIYE claimed he wasn't tired, he still drifted off in the middle of their hushed exchange. He had had little time to rest after taking command of Second Sand Camp. It was only because Mount Luo was close to Duanzhou and the new road ran smooth and unobstructed that he was able to rush back to sleep by Lanzhou's side.

Following several claps of spring thunder in the distance, the rain intensified in the latter half of the night. With so many things weighing on his mind, Xiao Chiye woke up a couple of hours before dawn. Shen Zechuan's brow was pressed to his temple; he slept soundly, his breathing even. Xiao Chiye listened to the sound for a while and felt an inexplicable sense of petty injustice.

Half awake, Shen Zechuan hummed—he liked to drag out the ends of his moans, making it difficult to tell if he was expressing pain or pleasure. Xiao Chiye was biting him, rocking against him softly amid his gasps for breath.

"Stop biting." Shen Zechuan's voice was hoarse from sleep. Without opening his eyes, he muttered, "It's all red."

It was indeed red.

More awake now, Shen Zechuan found himself unable to hide from Xiao Chiye's body, powerful as it bore down on him. It was as if he was being assaulted by the pouring rain itself. There was no distance between them. Sweat trailed down his chest, soaking the sheets.

Xiao Chiye lowered his head and pressed his ear to Lanzhou's lips.

Shen Zechuan was on the verge of breaking. He knew what Xiao Chiye wanted to hear in the close air of the bedroom. He spoke and breathed of love, his expressive eyes misting over as he shivered beneath the pounding of the waves.

The drawback of being instruments so in tune with one another was that even a momentary separation stirred up a storm of passion that demanded to be sated. Any time apart necessitated sensual pleasure to make up for the gap between them.

Xiao Chiye desired.

And desired still more.

"Hn—" Shen Zechuan moaned, unable to hold back. His neck arched, drenched in sweat, a mark of his vulnerability as he took Xiao Chiye in.

Under the clamor of rain beneath the eaves, a figure in a straw rain cape approached. When a knock sounded on the door, Shen Zechuan reached out to grab the bed-curtain. Xiao Chiye caught his wrist and pressed it to the bed; his strong arms, tanned from the sun, secured Shen Zechuan firmly in place.

The figure outside waited a moment, then knocked again.

Shen Zechuan squeezed out, "It's not…not Fei—"

Xiao Chiye didn't care who it was. His desire was an inferno. He wanted to dominate Lanzhou. Only he could see him, bite him, force him to beg for mercy.

Their breaths mingled.

"Chuan-er? It's dawn! Chengfeng is heading out to look at the fields. Do you want to go? If you do, I'll prepare a coat for you, and you can have some soup before you leave." Ji Gang always rose early; he'd already practiced boxing, and now he was here with a soup pot in hand.

Xiao Chiye hissed in chagrin and shoved everything else aside as he locked Lanzhou in place.

Too deep, Shen Zechuan protested silently. *A-Ye, it's too—*

He turned his head and buried his gasps in the sheets, hiding the sound under the dull roar of the rain.

Xiao Chiye was also gasping for breath. Through his heavy panting, a dangerous laugh escaped him as he admired the flush painting the side of Lanzhou's neck. Still, he didn't stop for an instant.

Damn it, Xiao Chiye thought diabolically.

The sheer act of possessing Shen Zechuan like this gave him a high unlike anything else.

Hearing no movement within, Ji Gang turned to Fei Sheng. "What time did the governor sleep last night?"

How would I know? Fei Sheng thought. Holding an umbrella over Ji Gang's birdcage, he answered, "Pretty late. Mister Yu has just returned, and he's only here for a few days; he has much to discuss with His Lordship regarding the yamen in the six prefectures."

"Didn't Mister Yu retire early yesterday?" Ji Gang was worried Shen Zechuan would fall ill again in all this rain. "Youjing will have to stay until the rain lets up. What's the rush?"

"Exactly," Fei Sheng concurred. "Shifu, that's just what I've been telling him."

Fei Sheng merely wanted to send the old man out of the courtyard as soon as possible. Er-ye was still inside, and if they were to cross paths, that would be the end of them. He lifted Ji Gang's birdcage and said, "Shifu, why does this bird look so listless? I hope it's not frozen from the cold!"

"It gets sleepy when it's full. This bird's just like Ding Tao's sparrow." Ji Gang was becoming increasingly worried at not hearing an answer from Shen Zechuan for so long. "Is there no one attending him inside the room?"

"How about I walk you to the side hall to wait? We can have a few cups of hot tea. Master should be awake soon."

Ji Gang took the birdcage back. After handing the soup to Fei Sheng, he placed his free hand behind his back and said, "I won't be able to sit still. I'll go check on Yuanzhuo; his medicine is still simmering on the stove. When Chuan-er gets up, ask him if he's going out. The rain's so heavy today; I'll have to tag along."

Fei Sheng agreed that he would and bowed to send Ji Gang off. Once Ji Gang was finally out of sight, he lifted his hem and rushed back to the room, where he whispered at the door, "Er-ye, it's already past dawn. The advisors will be arriving very soon. Our governor—"

The doors swung open to both sides to reveal Xiao Chiye with a robe draped loosely over his shoulders. His neck was still flushed and glistening with sweat.

Not daring to look at him directly, Fei Sheng instantly stepped back and bowed. “Good morning to you, Er-ye!”

Taking a hot handkerchief from the tray in a nearby attendant’s hands, Xiao Chiye wiped the sweat from his neck. “The sun’s barely up and you’re already here rushing him. Your master sleeps late, and he’s a light sleeper on top of that. How can this be good for him?”

“Er-ye is so considerate! You’re right of course,” Fei Sheng agreed, playing up to him at once.

Xiao Chiye tossed the handkerchief back onto the tray. He was just about to say more when he saw that Ji Gang had returned. The man was standing at the end of the veranda, staring fixedly at them.

Fei Sheng looked back and could only think, *Heavens help me!*

Ji Gang strode over. On seeing Ji Gang’s livid expression, Fei Sheng nearly retreated—but Er-ye was right here watching. He plucked up his courage and stepped bravely up to Ji Gang with an apologetic smile. “Did Shifu leave something behind? You could just send a boy over. Why walk all the way back? It’s raining so hard!”

Ji Gang stepped left and right, but was unable to get around Fei Sheng. At last, Ji Gang grabbed him by his collar and lifted him off to the side, though Fei Sheng was a whole head taller than him.

“Shifu—” Xiao Chiye began.

“I’m not your Shifu!” Ji Gang thundered. His hands were trembling. Looking at Xiao Chiye’s wanton state of dress, he took half a step back in horror and pointed at him, sputtering, “How—how dare you? How dare—you?!”

It had occurred to him that something was amiss when Xiao Chiye asked to be punished via a lashing last time, yet even then, he hadn’t dared think of Shen Zechuan in that light. He had tried every means possible to rationalize it to himself; he had never expected the truth to be shoved right in his face. This was his son he was talking about!

Ji Gang stood there with his back drenched by rain, incensed. The whole thing was preposterous. His ears rang, and he stumbled back a step, as if made unsteady by a hard slap to the face. Fei Sheng reached out to support his arm, and Ji Gang flung his hand away and bellowed, “Did you know? You knew, didn’t you?!”

Fei Sheng forced a smile. “I—”

Ji Gang threw his birdcage to the ground, where it rolled and tumbled down the steps. The bird inside flapped in alarm. His hands shook badly, but he still had his strength. A strong wind was all the warning Xiao Chiye had before Ji Gang’s fist struck him with such force that blood filled his mouth.

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Fei Sheng lunged and grabbed Ji Gang's arm with both hands. "Shifu—Shifu, please!"

The rain drummed down. Xiao Chiye pressed the tip of his tongue to the cut in his mouth. "Shifu, if you want to strike me, I'll take it without a word. If you want me to kneel, then I'll kneel without complaint. But if Shifu still wants to arrange some other match for Lanzhou—there is no one in the world who can do that."

Ji Gang had been biding his time this year, not daring to push Shen Zechuan too hard. Still, he'd kept his eyes peeled and scouted a handful of families in Cizhou with daughters, which he'd mentioned to Shen Zechuan in his letters. Shen Zechuan hadn't agreed to any of them, simply replying that he already had someone who cherished him by his side. Still, the whole time Ji Gang had been in Duanzhou, he'd never laid eyes on such a person. He'd been wondering if Shen Zechuan was only saying it to placate him. He'd never expected them to actually exist!

"You scoundrel." Ji Gang wrenched his arm free. "I'll kill you!"

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Chapter 236:
Matched Jades

IN ALL THE TIME Ji Gang had watched Shen Zechuan grow up, he had never expected him to rise to the top and become a minister or be conferred a noble title. All he'd ever asked for was Shen Zechuan's safety and well-being, the blessing of a smooth life, and an abundance of descendants. With all that had happened, anyone could forget that kick Xiao Chiye had given him in Qudu—anyone but Ji Gang, for Shen Zechuan was his one and only remaining son.

Now that Ji Gang recalled what Xiao Chiye had said back in Cizhou about his concern for Shen Zechuan, it all seemed premeditated. This scoundrel had long planned to show his hand this way. How ludicrous that everyone else could see it, and there was Ji Gang, the only fool convincing himself otherwise. He had even defended and made excuses for this bastard in his mind! What brotherhood?! *Bullshit!*

Ji Gang punched Xiao Chiye again, but it wasn't enough to assuage his wrath. He grabbed a riding crop lying nearby. "I believed your lies and invited a wolf into my own house! You've had designs on Chuan-er as far back as Cizhou!" The more he spoke, the greater his fury grew, and in an instant he'd forgotten all that was good about Xiao Chiye, remembering only old debts. He lashed out with the whip and cried again, "I'll kill you!"

But of course, Fei Sheng couldn't let Ji Gang continue to strike Xiao Chiye. "Shifu, Shifu!" he pleaded. "Er-ye's willingness to accept a beating means he genuinely intends to talk it out with you. There's no need to make a scene. Let's go sit down in our own courtyard and talk. His Lordship is still waiting for you!"

"Get lost!" Ji Gang bellowed. "You're all a bunch of scoundrels too!"

The Embroidered Uniform Guard in this courtyard had all learned some martial arts from Ji Gang; by now they were hardly different from Ji Gang's own disciples. Even as they watched Ji Gang's ferocious attack, none of them dared try to stop him. What was more, the riding crop belonged to Xiao Chiye himself and was much heavier than the ones made

in Cizhou. A single lash caused an explosion of searing pain that seemed to rip to the bone.

Unlike when Ji Gang had whipped Xiao Chiye in Cizhou, he was truly enraged this time. Xiao Chiye's wide-sleeved robe didn't do much to block the blows, and every snap drew streaks of blood. Ji Gang lashed out with such ferocity that Xiao Chiye struggled, swallowing a few mouthfuls of chilly air.

Yet he still stubbornly refused to admit his fault. Ji Gang spat, "I'll find a match for him, and it'll be none of your business!"

"No." This was the one point Xiao Chiye refused to concede. He wouldn't countenance a single word of falsehood here. "There are plenty of decent men in the world, but I will never give Shen Lanzhou to anyone else!"

Ji Gang was so furious he was dizzy. Pointing the whip at him, he cried, "You wanted to kill my son, and now you want to ruin his life! So he won't wed a wife or sire children?! Why don't you ruin your own life first?!"

That there were cut-sleeves in Qudu was no secret; Ji Gang had seen his fair share when he served as the vice commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard. These young men might be inseparable for a time, glued at the hip, but eventually, they would all have to start real families. Furthermore, Xiao Chiye was Xiao Fangxu's son of legitimate birth. If Xiao Jiming didn't take up the mantle of Libei's commander, it would fall to Xiao Chiye. If he became the king wolf in the future, whether or not he took a wife would no longer be his own personal affair, but that of the entire Libei Armored Cavalry.

The Xiao Clan's armored cavalry was a hundred and twenty thousand strong. Should Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan join together in union, it would only strengthen the growing friendship between Zhongbo and Libei. Ji Gang ought to assent for the sake of both public and private interests—but that was only if Xiao Chiye were a maiden. If he were a woman, even one with a feisty temper, as long as it was Shen Zechuan's wish, Ji Gang would've been ready to accept it.

"If Shifu will give your permission, I can send a letter asking my sister-in-law to come with a formal proposal of marriage right now. Or I can

even marry into your family." Having been on the receiving end of Xiao Fangxu's beatings growing up, a few lashes from Ji Gang were nothing to him. If Ji Gang wanted to settle the score, fine—but no matter what, Xiao Chiye had to obtain his approval today.

Ji Gang's breath caught in his throat, and he choked so hard he pitched backward. Fei Sheng hurried to support the old man as he seethed. Now this Xiao Chiye was not just proposing a marriage, but forcing one. He had never seen a vile man sound so self-righteous!

Hands braced on his knees as he knelt before Ji Gang, Xiao Chiye pressed on. "Lanzhou accepted my sister-in-law's bracelets; he's long been mine. Shifu, how can you find him a woman? If he really agreed to meet her, then he'd be a heartless cad. If Shifu wants children, Ding Tao and Li Xiong are still young—they can stay by your side and keep you company. If you'd like, you can raise them until the age of twenty-eight before marrying them off. I won't stop you."

Ji Gang watched Xiao Chiye spout this nonsense with a straight face. How were Ding Tao and Li Xiong still children? They were nearly nineteen and should have been thrown out on assignments ages ago—wait, that wasn't the issue here!

"Please say yes, Shifu." Xiao Chiye prostrated himself on the ground. "If you don't say yes, I'm going to call you Father."

Ji Gang was so revered among the Embroidered Uniform Guard in his day because he was a reasonable man. He had put plenty of thought into the matter of Shen Zechuan's marriage on his son's behalf. If Xiao Chiye were to sit down calmly with Ji Gang, he could never convince him with reason. Shen Zechuan was instrumental to Libei's current grain supply. Ji Gang was bound to wonder if Libei's interest in Shen Zechuan now was solely because of the military or political situation.

But it had never occurred to Ji Gang that Xiao Chiye would be so shameless and thick-skinned as to put him on the spot right outside the door. It would prove hard for him to walk away today without settling this. "You can stop with your honeyed words," Ji Gang said, squeezing his reply through clenched teeth. "Even if your sister-in-law comes, I won't see her."

"But you have to see Lanzhou," Xiao Chiye said, his forehead still pressed to the ground. "Father, Lanzhou is clueless about these rites and

rituals. Without you by his side to watch over him, my sister-in-law will trick him back to Libei to be her"—Xiao Chiye paused for a split second as he reconsidered his words, then rushed ahead—"her brother-in-law! If you wish to fulfill my request this way, I'll have no complaints."

Ji Gang flung the whip down, driven beyond the limits of his forbearance. "Shut up!" He couldn't be bothered to refute Xiao Chiye's points. He gritted his teeth and snapped, "Don't you dare *dream* of marrying into this family!"

Xiao Chiye's robe was still open at the top, though the flush on his neck had faded. He didn't dispute Ji Gang's words. The rain poured in torrents, and a chill crept under the eaves. Ji Gang's fury was undiminished, but the initial rush to his head had faded.

Countenance solemn, Xiao Chiye said, "All Shifu's worries have crossed my mind as well. My brother and sister-in-law have a harmonious relationship. They have Xun-er now, and they will go on to have more children. Libei doesn't need me to produce any heirs, and I don't plan to. You watched Lanzhou grow up with the hope that he'd one day have a happy family of his own—I know that, and I wish the same. Isn't my loving him, respecting him, and growing old with him also happiness? Shifu doesn't trust me; you fear I'll mistreat Lanzhou in the future, so you want to find him a woman. That's your right, and it's indeed not my place to interfere. But I've already given him my life. If he were to marry someone else, it'd be the same as killing me."

Xiao Chiye was no ordinary man. He had both courage and means. These two might now be a pair of matched jades, in perfect step with each other—but what about after the war? If Xiao Chiye had a change of heart, he had a thousand ways to cast Shen Zechuan aside. Ji Gang's greatest fear was his son being left alone after Ji Gang was dead and gone. Nowadays, everyone respected Shen Zechuan and called him *lord* and *governor*, but to Ji Gang, he was still Chuan-er, and he had a father's worries for him.

This gamble was not one Ji Gang could take. Xiao Chiye was right—he didn't trust him.

A long while passed in silence until Xiao Chiye heard the tap of wooden clogs from behind. He turned his head slightly to see a properly attired Shen Zechuan, fan in hand, sneaking a glance at him.

"No," Ji Gang said to Xiao Chiye, though he looked at Shen Zechuan instead. His weathered face seemed to carry the weight of years as he finished decisively, "It's not going to happen."

In the courtyard next door, Yao Wenyu was lighting incense. He held the stick between his fingers, its fragrance so intense that Hunu refused to get close. Yao Wenyu couldn't stand this scent either—but once the rain subsided over the next few days, the mosquitoes would make their appearance. As he studied the smoke curling into the air, a hand reached out and took the stick from him.

Qiao Tianya brought it to his nose for a sniff and frowned. "This is way too strong. Who gave this to you? Send it back for him to use himself."

"It's from the traveling merchants." Yao Wenyu turned his wheelchair to face the courtyard. "This Tathagata incense from Liuzhou sells for an exorbitant price in Juexi."

Qiao Tianya extinguished it with a pinch of his fingers. "Smells like stinky tofu."

"The folks in Liuzhou have a taste for the stuff." Yao Wenyu waved away the smell. "Remind Fei Sheng not to light this in His Lordship's room."

Qiao Tianya felt that Yao Wenyu had been avoiding him recently. He jammed his foot into the wheel of his chair. "You couldn't have met Fei Sheng more than a few times. How are you on such familiar terms?"

"We all work for His Lordship." Yao Wenyu paused and turned to look at Qiao Tianya. "There's no such thing as strangers."

Qiao Tianya had been in good spirits, but his smile faded as he met Yao Wenyu's eyes. Yao Wenyu hadn't been willing to look Qiao Tianya in the eyes for some time. He had dodged his gaze out of embarrassment, as if his humiliation from that feverish night was always at the forefront of his mind. But now, his face was frank and open, as if he was still that piece of unpolished jade, untainted by the shadow of desire.

No such thing as strangers.

Qiao Tianya was no different from Fei Sheng, Kong Ling, and anyone else Yao Wenyu had met. He was no longer that secret and special companion. A flick of his sleeves, and Yao Wenyu could go back to being the banished immortal.

"The rain's heavy today," Yao Wenyu said. "If you're not in a hurry, take your meal before you go out. Chengfeng and Youjing are coming in the afternoon, and it's time to report on the arrangements for the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry. You may want to discuss it with them before heading out." Yao Wenyu looked down at the foot set on the axle of his wheelchair before returning his gaze to Qiao Tianya. "You're blocking it."

His smile was thin, as if resigned, but there was a hint of bitterness in it. "Someone with one lame leg can still skirt around obstacles, but I can't. Don't tease me."

The wind tapped against the wind chimes, and a few drops of rain splattered over the thin blanket on his lap. Qiao Tianya moved his foot aside. He'd always handled himself with ease, but now he cut a sorry figure under Yao Wenyu's dispassionate gaze.

Yao Wenyu turned his wheelchair and entered his room. The wheels rolled over the floor, a measured, even noise. As he pushed the wheelchair, his exposed wrist briefly revealed Qiao Tianya's red cord before his wide sleeves fell forward and covered it again, smothering it in a cloud of white.

When Shen Zechuan arrived in the evening, Ji Gang was resting his head on one arm with his face to the wall, as if dozing.

Shen Zechuan set his folding fan at the edge of the bed and took a seat. "Shifu, are you asleep?"

Ji Gang opened his eyes. "You know I am, yet you ask."

Just as he'd done when he was young, Shen Zechuan scooted his chair closer. "I haven't had a chance to talk into the night with Shifu since I left the Temple of Guilt."

"You came here tonight for a man." Ji Gang paused, unable to vent his fury on Shen Zechuan. It seeped through his chest, turning into self-

reproach and sorrow. “What’s so good about him? Your Xiansheng wouldn’t approve, and neither do I.”

“Xiansheng used to praise him,” Shen Zechuan said softly. “An ‘extraordinary prodigy,’ he said.”

“Are extraordinary prodigies content in the home?” Ji Gang sat up and looked at Shen Zechuan. “Extraordinary prodigies want the whole world. Are you willing to share a seat with him in the future?”

Shen Zechuan’s expression was dutiful as he lowered his eyes and said, “That won’t be for me to say.”

Ji Gang heaved a sigh, face bathed in the glow of the candle. After a moment, he said bitterly, “When the grand mentor asked you what you would do if you had the Embroidered Uniform Guard under your control, I ought to have realized it was no question for a student. Who has the right to control the Embroidered Uniform Guard? The grand mentor secretly taught you far too much, right under everyone’s noses. And you learned it all so well—so how can you not understand? Today’s pair of matched jades will be tomorrow’s tigers fighting over the mountain.”

It was not that Xiao Chiye was too mediocre. No—he was too outstanding. That was why Ji Gang could not set his mind at ease.

“If I were a more capable man,” Ji Gang said, expression complicated as he gazed at Shen Zechuan, “or if your brother were still alive, then there would be no harm in staking your bets on him. But I’m old and useless. After I pass on, you will have to face everyone in this world alone. How can I feel reassured leaving you all by yourself?”

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Chapter 237:
Heirs

THE RAIN IN THE COURTYARD had tapered off, but the moonlight was still hidden behind clouds, leaving the room dim.

Shen Zechuan's lowered eyes were concealed by the darkness. He looked like a weary traveler at rest, riding out the endless tide of night. When he looked again at Ji Gang, there was something in his eyes he had never let show before. It was as if he had stripped off the skin that belonged to the prefectural governor, leaving behind only a slip of moonlight.

"If I didn't have Shifu and Ce'an, I would still be me. Only, it wouldn't be me who feared everyone in the world—everyone else would fear me. Shen Wei's blood runs in my veins. I have no need for heirs."

Ji Gang's heart ached so much he nearly wept. "You are my son."

"I am your son, but my name is Shen Zechuan. Xiansheng taught me the scrolls, but I am no emperor."

Emperor.

The supreme being of this land, who stood at the highest peak and overlooked the world. Simply wearing the crown didn't make one an emperor. A true emperor must not only be versed in the political art of checks and balances, but also possess the broadness of heart to accommodate everyone in the world. The celebrated emperors of flourishing eras past were all unparalleled men of benevolence, but Shen Zechuan's eyes were a cradle for violent storms. He was the sudden downpour that swept through the mountains and rivers of the country, the sharp blade that cleaved heaven and earth, not an emperor who ushered in a golden age of prosperity.

"Libei has a hundred and twenty thousand armored cavalry. Their horses could trample Zhongbo with a thought, but Ce'an put their lives in my hands—I have his horses and his elder brother's grain. He's willing to leave the open skies of Libei and ride his horse in my Duanzhou instead. Shifu, he's not afraid of my garrison troops, and I'm not afraid of his

armored cavalry. One day, I will capture the deer the Li Clan lost, and in turn, Ce'an will hold me captive. The sun and the moon have orbited for tens of thousands of years without destroying each other. This is the stability for which the world yearns. We are that equilibrium."

The blazing sun and the luminous moon.

The end of one war heralded the beginning of another. No sovereign would tolerate the kingdom they had carved out in the east. Only when Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan were united would Libei and Zhongbo have a chance to breathe and rebuild.

Shen Zechuan had given his consent for Xiao Jiming to build stables and a riding track on Mount Luo. This was both a concession and an opportunity for Libei. The roads Zhongbo was building would erase the boundary between the two lands, and when they joined as one, they would become a behemoth entrenched in the northeast, impossible to shake free.

Ji Gang sat cross-legged in silence. "He's well-trained in Ji-Style Boxing and comes and goes as he pleases. What's he got to be afraid of? Even if everything is as you say, you two still have no heirs. As long as this problem is left unresolved, Libei and Zhongbo won't last long."

Xiao Chiye donned his armor and waited in the main room for Shen Zechuan to return, long legs stretched in front of him as he slouched in the chair. The soft clatter of wheels sounded under the eaves. Fei Sheng lifted the hanging screen for Yao Wenyu and said, "His Lordship has not yet returned."

The thin blanket over Yao Wenyu's lap was a little damp. Sitting straighter in his wheelchair, he said, "I'm here to see Er-ye."

As Fei Sheng froze, unsure of what to say, Xiao Chiye called from within, "I'm here."

Yao Wenyu graciously declined Fei Sheng's offer of help and wheeled himself inside. Xiao Chiye drew his legs back and sat up, setting the book of military strategy he was reading aside. "What is it, Yuanzhuo?"

"Rarely do I get the chance to see you. Some things aren't suitable for letters and can only be discussed face to face." Yao Wenyu produced his

handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his palms. “Can Er-ye spare a moment?”

Xiao Chiye leaned back. “What’s on your mind that you have to bypass Lanzhou to discuss with me?”

Yao Wenyu finished wiping his hands and folded the handkerchief neatly before tucking it back into his sleeve. He was in no hurry. Speaking over the steady patter of rain, he said, “Matters that concern Libei should naturally be discussed with you. The empress dowager has suffered a setback in Qudu; Xue Yanqing’s next move will be to strip Han Cheng of his military power. When the time comes for the heir apparent to ascend the throne, she will surely confer a title on Marshal Qi to keep her in her place. Does Er-ye still plan to head down to Bianjun as promised?”

Of course Xiao Chiye would go. His trip to the Bianjun Commandery would determine whether or not Hassen’s surprise attack on Duanzhou would succeed. Besides, he trusted Qi Zhuyin.

Yao Wenyu found his answer in Xiao Chiye’s silence. Changing the subject, he said, “Does the grandson-heir—” He paused. Xiao Jiming had inherited Xiao Fangxu’s noble title, so Xiao Xun, as his son, ought to be called the heir now. Yao Wenyu corrected himself and continued, “Does the Heir of Libei have a capable teacher at home?”

Xiao Chiye tapped a finger on the table. “You wish to teach Xun-er.”

He was a perceptive man. He had sensed Yao Wenyu’s intent the moment he broached the topic. Xue Xiuzhuo’s heir apparent was about to ascend the throne, and they would soon confer a noble title upon Qi Zhuyin. By the time the war with Biansha was over, Libei and Zhongbo might have to part ways with Qidong for good. Shen Zechuan had his eyes on Qudu, and Yao Wenyu was already considering the issue of heirs.

“We wolves of Libei,” Xiao Chiye said solemnly, his head held high, “will not be emperors.”

Xiao Chiye and Shen Zechuan had no children. The intent in bringing Xiao Xun to Zhongbo and placing him under the tutelage of Yao Wenyu and the other advisors could not be clearer. Naming Xiao Xun as Shen Zechuan’s successor would be much too good a deal for Libei—so much so that Xiao Chiye was disinclined to agree.

“You have the governor’s interests in mind, and so are unwilling to let the Xiao Clan supplant him. But even if it were another child and not the Heir of Libei, that child still wouldn’t bear the surname Shen,” said Yao Wenyu. “His Lordship will never let Shen Wei’s name enter the ancestral temple.”

Shen Zechuan wished for Shen Wei to wander as a lost soul in the wilderness of Dunzhou for all eternity. Giving him a place in the ancestral temple, where he would receive offerings and incense, was out of the question. He intended to sever the Shen Clan’s bloodline.

“Xun-er is the Heir of Libei. My brother will never agree.”

After a moment of silence, Yao Wenyu changed his tone, speaking as he would to a friend: “Do you have another option?”

The night was filled with the sound of rain, but it was warm inside the room. Nevertheless, Yao Wenyu’s face was pale and drawn. “Great men abound in this world. Do you know why I came all the way to Zhongbo to join Lanzhou?”

Xiao Chiye’s eyes were dark and deep.

Yao Wenyu wasn’t afraid of Xiao Chiye. As long as he could finish this game, he wasn’t afraid of anyone. “I watched him flee northward with you, only to stop in Zhongbo. I thought he intended to clear Shen Wei’s name, but he didn’t care about that at all. He didn’t treat Zhongbo as his native land, nor Qudu as his home; whether he advanced or retreated depended only on his will. I know he is not suited to be an emperor. But I still want to be his advisor, because he’s a natural-born overlord. Your father could see that Zhongbo was rapidly rising in power and prominence. He granted Shen Zechuan entry into Libei in part because he knew Xiao Xun was Shen Zechuan’s one and only option.”

Xiao Fangxu was the king of wolves who had established the great territories of Libei—also known as their homeland. As a young man standing at Luoxia Pass, he had caught a whiff of the Guangcheng Emperor’s desire and seized the moment, rising to become a conferred prince of the Zhou empire who held a massive military force in his hand. He was far more visionary than either of his sons. Shen Zechuan had only one path forward. If it weren’t for Xiao Chiye and Xiao Xun, Xiao Fangxu would never have allowed Shen Zechuan to return to Zhongbo alive.

“If Lanzhou dares to desire it,” Xiao Chiye answered, enunciating each word, “then it’s his to take.”

“Then it’s his to take,” Yao Wenyu echoed. “But only with Xiao Xun.”

The rain drummed outside without rhythm. Xiao Chiye didn’t answer.

Li Jianting found the night too cold. She hadn’t slept well since her illness and often startled awake at night. She stared at the canopy until dawn, then rolled over and got up before the palace maids could call her.

Her attendants were all new faces. They knelt while straightening the hem of the heir’s robes, and when Li Jianting sat at the vanity, they held the jewelry case as they tidied her hair. Li Jianting had lost weight during her illness and looked increasingly sharp and stern, without a trace of a woman’s softness.

Sleeping fitfully as she did, and still recovering from the effects of the poison, she was inevitably tired. Dazed, she felt a coolness at her earlobe. Before the palace maid who was leaning over to affix the earring could react, the heir apparent jerked to her feet, her complexion ghastly. Quickly mastering herself, Li Jianting reprimanded her in a low voice: “Take it away!”

All the maids fell to their knees, flustered and confused at what they had done to incur the heir’s displeasure.

Li Jianting pressed her lips into a thin line and, in the resultant silence, saw her blurred figure in the mirror. She stared at her reflection for a long time, then said, “I don’t wear earrings when I’m receiving lessons from the esteemed gentlemen in the front hall.”

The maids kowtowed a few times and acknowledged the order in timid voices.

Refusing their assistance, Li Jianting pulled on her overcoat herself. The precious material encased her like a suit of armor. She felt better with it on, but she still did not speak.

When she stepped out the door, a familiar figure was waiting on the veranda.

Fuman stepped forward and opened the umbrella for Li Jianting. He said, fawning, "It's raining so hard today. This humble servant has prepared a sedan for Your Highness so you can nap on the way. I'll call you when we arrive. It won't hold up anything."

Li Jianting didn't move. She smiled slowly. "Good morning, Gonggong. You must have your hands full investigating this case."

Fuman didn't dare to rush her. "How would this humble servant know anything about investigation? I rely completely on the Grand Secretary's advice. He specifically sent the lords from the Ministry of Justice to supervise."

What he meant was that he was not the sole person passing judgment on the case; all his findings went through Kong Qiu, so she shouldn't blame him.

Without blinking, Li Jianting asked, "Then I suppose there's no chance of Fengquan's release?"

Fuman switched tactics and put on a worried look. "He's the late Lady Mu's brother, and he has connections with the Garden Service. The Ministry of Justice would be ill-advised to bend the law to release him. I've made several trips myself to the Grand Secretariat's office compound and have mentioned it to the Grand Secretary as well—he's a good man."

Fuman reckoned Fengquan's return to the palace must have been because he had attended to the heir apparent for a long time and built a strong bond between master and servant. So he knew better than to slander Fengquan before Li Jianting; the heir was still partial to him. At any rate, he had plenty of time. As long as he was here and Fengquan was not, Li Jianting would sooner or later forget Fengquan.

"I've been ill and haven't received much news. What exactly is going on?"

Fuman held the umbrella for Li Jianting and stood in the rain. "Just investig—ayy, Your Highness, watch your feet. The steps are slippery here. Please take my arm! The issue with this case lies in the food Your Highness ate. This humble servant and the Ministry of Justice checked Your

Highness's meals from that day. The Garden Service, which provided the vegetables, proved to be most problematic. The people there are a mixed bag—who knows which of them may be harboring ulterior motives?"

He downplayed his role in the case and let the Ministry of Justice assume full responsibility. If Fengquan were to die, it would be Kong Qiu's problem. The Grand Secretary was the heir's teacher and decided whether or not she could ascend the throne. Even if Li Jianting was displeased, she couldn't vent her temper on Kong Qiu.

Li Jianting hadn't planned on taking the sedan chair, but she changed her mind at the last minute and bent to step inside. Fuman, in high spirits now, called out to Her Highness to be careful, then tucked the hanging screen in for her and urged the sedan-bearing eunuchs to make haste. By the time Li Jianting arrived at Mingli Hall, Cen Yu had been waiting quite a while. Standing under the eaves, he saw Li Jianting stepping down from the sedan and couldn't help but furrow his brow.

The heir apparent had never been one for these sorts of trappings before. That was how she had earned the respect of the ministers. Could it be that the moment the empress dowager fell from grace, she refused to walk even a few steps on her own?

Cen Yu paid his obeisance to Li Jianting, who came under the eaves and returned the greeting. Cen Yu didn't enter the hall immediately, but said with solemn deference, "Rain in spring is as precious as oil. The fertile farmlands of the eight cities are all nourished by this rain. Your Highness has yet to ascend the throne, and has no title to your name. How can you ride a sedan in the palace?"

Li Jianting hastily gathered her sleeves in apology and said as if enlightened, "This student has realized the error of her ways."

Fuman, who had followed her under the eaves, couldn't let the heir apparent bear the blame—he was the one who had arranged the sedan, after all. He hurriedly put in, "Her Highness has just recovered from a major illness, and her esteemed health is precious. What's more, it's raining so hard—"

Cen Yu's countenance changed as he bellowed, "Her Highness and I are in the midst of conversation as student and teacher. How dare a eunuch interrupt?!"

Bemoaning his blunder, Fuman fell to the ground and prostrated himself. “This humble servant, I…”

To think that in his fluster, he had offended a secretariat minister!

Both Cen Yu and Kong Qiu had lived through the corruption of state politics under Pan Rugui’s faction, so it was with true passion that they hated palace eunuchs meddling in governmental affairs. Fuman had often visited the Grand Secretariat’s office compound, but his merit had always rested in the fact that he was willing to play dumb and keep his mouth shut.

In Cen Yu’s eyes, this eunuch had just arrived at the heir’s side today, and already he dared arrange a sedan and butt into their conversation. If he allowed Fuman to remain for a few more days, an absolute collapse of order awaited them.

“Since you dared to corrupt the heir apparent’s habits today, you will no doubt dare to disrupt her administration in the future!” Cen Yu flushed with anger. “How dare you, you castrated bastard!”

Fuman knocked his head against the ground until his forehead was purple and green, new bruises overlapping old ones.

Li Jianting spoke up. “Teacher, it was my fault…”

“Your Highness is the heir apparent. A sovereign ought to keep their distance from crafty sycophants! Men, strip him of his outer robe and drag him away!”

Fuman was a eunuch of the Directorate of Ceremonial Affairs. If it were still the reign of Yongyi, Cen Yu would never have been able to berate him this way. Hearing the thump of the guards’ footsteps, Fuman’s hands trembled as he shuffled toward Li Jianting and pleaded, “This humble servant has made a grave mistake! This humble servant—”

The guards stripped Fuman without so much as a word and dragged him to the open space in front of Mingli Hall. Rain poured around them as Fuman knelt in the center, his lips turning blue from the cold.

“Slap him!” Cen Yu commanded.

A guard lifted the hem of his robe and stepped forward to deal Fuman a strike that left his ear ringing. He didn’t dare cry out, much less dodge the blow. Cen Yu gave them no orders to stop. He turned and lifted the hanging

screen, motioning for Li Jianting to enter. He left Fuman outside, the crisp sound of slaps echoing again and again behind them.

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Chapter 238:
Searing Urgency

NO ONE ELSE WAS CALLED to serve in Mingli Hall. Cen Yu lowered the hanging screen and led Li Jianting to a seat. Recovering his composure, he said, "I shouldn't have asked Your Highness to appear while you're still so ill, but this is a matter of some urgency. I'm afraid I had no choice but to hurry you."

Li Jianting took her seat. "Please go ahead, Teacher."

The sound of slaps came in stops and starts. Feeling a little apprehensive, Cen Yu cautiously lifted the bamboo blinds to glance out. Only when he was certain no one else was listening did he say, "We are about to conclude the Dancheng tax case. This has implicated a fair number of officials. Liang Cuishan has already begun the audit of the field taxes in Chuancheng, and after that will be the Hua Clan's Dicheng. The thought of Your Highness alone in the palace has us humble subjects burning with anxiety."

The inner palace of the imperial harem was forbidden to court officials. Li Jianting had only just recovered from being poisoned. The Grand Secretariat worried that the empress dowager, with her own clan at risk, might be desperate enough to hold the life of the heir apparent hostage.

A warm fur collar was still gathered around Li Jianting's snow-white cheeks. The flower embellishment between her brows sank slightly as she frowned. "We are at a critical juncture with the Dancheng field taxes and the completion of the field surveys—there mustn't be any delay. No need to slow down the process for my sake. Just follow the normal procedures."

When Li Jianting had first appeared, Cen Yu had been severely prejudiced against her. But the heir apparent had a dignified bearing and was keen to learn. She referred to him deferentially as *Teacher,* and now she was even willing to put her life on the line for the sake of commoners' livelihoods. Emotion welled up in Cen Yu, and he knelt to Li Jianting, an indistinct sob escaping from his throat as he kowtowed. "Your Highness… you—you've suffered too much!"

Li Jianting got to her feet and held a hand out near Cen Yu's elbow to encourage him up. "Please rise."

"Your Highness, you must be mindful of your safety in the palace." Cen Yu wiped his tears with his sleeves. "If the empress dowager dares to coerce Your Highness, we will fight with our lives."

Li Jianting sighed. "I'm not deserving of it. But Teacher, the Helian Marquis of Chuancheng is an old family friend of the Han Clan of Wucheng. This is a perilous task."

Faced with Li Jianting's frankness, Cen Yu felt even more sorrowful. As court officials, they boasted of being loyal ministers of the state, yet they left the heir apparent stranded in the inner palace, living each day in danger of losing her life. Tears streamed from his aged eyes. "That's right. Han Cheng has the capital's soldiers under his control, so this humble subject and my colleagues dare not act precipitously. It has been hard on Your Highness."

"Han Cheng's squandering of public funds is common knowledge among both the imperial court and the common folks. What's more, he's narrow-minded and petty. Teacher is the one being put on the spot. The Eight Great Battalions, as soldiers of the capital, have fallen back into their old ways in recent years. They've accomplished nothing since the reign of Xiande when Xi Gu'an was still the commissioner." Li Jianting paused, then continued more slowly, "The empress dowager and the capital troops share a common lot. It will be difficult indeed for you to take action against Han Cheng."

Cen Yu hadn't expected the heir to see things so clearly. "Marshal Qi is in Qudu, and the Qidong Garrison Troops are just beyond the city gate. We're at a critical juncture now; there is no time to lose. We humble subjects must remove Han Cheng as soon as possible."

"Marshal Qi is ostensibly here to accompany Madam Qi on a visit home. There are only a few thousand Qidong troops in the entourage. If they should really come to blows, I'm afraid Qidong would be too late to the rescue. Qudu would be in a perilous position."

The Eight Great Battalions had twenty thousand soldiers. Not only were they familiar with the streets of Qudu, they also controlled the city gates. As if that wasn't enough, Han Cheng had the Embroidered Uniform

Guard keeping an eye on Qi Zhuyin's movements at all times. Half a month had passed since the day Qi Zhuyin deceived Han Cheng in the prison. Han Cheng had surely realized by now that her threats were empty and started making moves.

Li Jianting rose to her feet. Through the gap in the bamboo blinds, she could see Fuman still getting slapped. Her expression remained unchanged, but her eyes were cold. When she spoke to Cen Yu, her tone was as mild as ever. "I have a plan to remove Han Cheng."

"Your Highness, please go on."

"The inner court has been nothing but an ornament since the end of the reign of Xiande. The Eastern Depot that should check the Embroidered Uniform Guard is an empty husk. It's one of the reasons Han Cheng feels so sure of himself. To rid ourselves of Han Cheng, we must enlist the palace eunuchs."

The color drained from Cen Yu's face in horror. "The Pan faction undermined court politics for a mere ten years, yet look at the destruction they wrought. The secretariat elder worked himself to the bone to deprive the inner court of their power. Your Highness, these castrated schemers cannot be used!"

"Teacher, that's where you're wrong." Li Jianting turned to Cen Yu. "The corruption of state politics by the eunuch faction was, at heart, the fault of the throne. These palace eunuchs are domestic slaves of the Son of Heaven. They can be used, just not entrusted with heavy responsibilities."

Li Jianting had been personally taught by Xue Xiuzhuo. She was familiar with the Pan faction that had operated within the court from the reign of Yongyi to the reign of Xiande. Like Kong Qiu, Cen Yu, and the rest of the Grand Secretariat's ministers, she had misgivings about palace eunuchs. But her opinions as a subject and as a sovereign were two separate matters. The forces that flowed around authority and power were like undercurrents surging below the surface: impossible to eradicate completely. Only by harnessing them would one be able to hold them in check.

"The Hanshi Festival[1] is right around the corner. As usual, the palace will host a banquet of cold delicacies for all of its officials. When Han

Cheng removes his sword to attend the banquet," Li Jianting said, lifting her hand and pulling out her golden hairpin, "that will be our time to act."

As the chief commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard as well as the commissioner of the Eight Great Battalions, Han Cheng had the right to carry his weapon within the palace. But after the assassination attempt on Li Jianheng during the reign of Tianchen, the rules had changed. An exception had been made for Shen Zechuan to become Li Jianheng's personal guard, and subsequently, all blade-bearing guards during banquets were personally appointed by the emperor. Now that Great Zhou had no emperor to appoint them, Han Cheng had to attend the banquet without his blade.

Cen Yu looked at that golden hairpin. The slender fingers holding it were pale from having resided indoors for so long. The heir apparent had grown so thin after her illness that her bones jutted through her skin, but her wrist, covered with the layers of brocade, had the air of tempered steel.

Cen Yu lifted the hem of his robe and prostrated again, sobbing. "Han Cheng is a skilled fighter. What if he lashes out when cornered and hurts Your Highness?!"

"Marshal Qi won a battle in Bianjun just this spring. The Grand Secretary can grant her a seat at the feast as a commendation. Han Cheng is the commissioner of the capital troops. Let him sit beside the marshal." Li Jianting had considered her plan carefully. "Fuman and Fengquan can lead the palace eunuchs. As long as Han Cheng enters the palace gates, we will see to it that he never leaves."

For the first time, Cen Yu got a sense of just how formidable the heir apparent was.

The rivalry between Fuman and Fengquan had begun as early as the Tianchen Emperor's time. Fuman making Fengquan the prime suspect in his investigation was merely his ploy to eliminate a rival. He wanted to climb to the top of the inner court and become the Director of the Seal of the Directorate of Ceremonial Affairs after Li Jianting's ascension to the throne. This person was adept in the art of flattery and had repeatedly changed sides to his advantage. If they left him to his own devices, it'd take only a change in the wind and a promise from Han Cheng for him to ruin everything they'd worked for.

As for Fengquan, Li Jianting wanted to return him to her side not least because he would never collaborate with Fuman after his time in a holding cell. Their mutual animosity would keep them both in check. In fact, they might even compete against each other in the execution of this plan in a bid to win her trust.

Han Cheng held both the military seal of the Eight Great Battalions and the authority token of the Embroidered Uniform Guard in Qudu. If he died, the Eight Great Battalions and Embroidered Uniform Guard would be thrown into chaos, and thus effectively neutered—they wouldn't be able to cause any trouble in Qudu for the foreseeable future. But even if Han Cheng attended the banquet without his blade, he would surely leave his trusted Embroidered Uniform Guard associates just outside the hall. There would only be a small window of time in which to kill him. Should they fail in their first attempt, he only needed to raise the alarm, and all the court officials in the hall would be in danger.

"This needs to stay between you and the Grand Secretary. Not a word of our plans must get out." Li Jianting leaned down again to help Cen Yu up. "Our success or failure hinges on this one move."

A frigid wind swept up the bamboo blinds. Cen Yu met Li Jianting's eyes and nodded sharply. He answered in a deep, quiet voice, "We will surely live up to Your Highness's expectations!"

Outside in the rain, Fuman had been slapped until both ears were temporarily deaf, and blood trickled from the corners of his mouth. He was weeping when Cen Yu stepped out the door and eyed him with a frosty expression. Dazed, he pleaded, "This humble servant has realized the errors of his ways. Your Excellency, Your Excellency…"

Cen Yu dusted off his sleeves. "If not for Her Highness's mercy, I would not let you off today. Never mind. Off you go."

The guards retreated and returned to stand at attention outside Mingli hall.

Fuman fell forward on his knees and repeatedly kowtowed to Cen Yu. "Your Excellency is right. This humble servant won't dare make such a mistake again."

Li Jianting lifted the hanging screen and stepped out. Seeing the wretched state of Fuman's face, streaked with tears and snot, she lowered her sleeves to cover her hands. "You are excused. Clean yourself up and put on a fresh set of robes. Then wait in attendance before the courtyard."

Fuman raised an arm to wipe at the tears on his face. Eyes on Li Jianting's shoes, he kowtowed a few more times. "This humble servant shall do as you command."

As Fuman got to his feet, he hastily bundled his sodden robe from under his feet. Through the pouring rain, he saw no sign of disdain on the heir apparent's face—only a shallow hint of sympathy.

Kong Qiu was careful to keep their preparations secret: All their discussions took place in their private residences. They did not gather in groups, but instead used visitation cards to make individual visits one at a time. The rain stopped and started again, and in the blink of an eye, it was the day of the Hanshi Festival.

Fengquan was still recuperating after his tribulations in prison. Today, he was helping the heir apparent affix her flower embellishment. He hunched in front of the mirror; whenever he lifted his arm, his wrist revealed the marks from his torture.

Li Jianting didn't shut her eyes. She watched Fengquan, as if studying him.

His hand trembled slightly under Li Jianting's gaze and he almost set the flower in the wrong spot. Li Jianting held his wrist steady and guided the flower back to the center of her forehead. "What did the physician say?"

Fengquan listened to the soft rustle stirred up by the palace maids' movements. Avoiding Li Jianting's gaze, he answered, "I thank Your Highness for your kindness—the physician had no serious concerns."

Li Jianting got to her feet, and the palace maid waiting behind her draped on her outer robe. Li Jianting turned her head to look at herself in the mirror. She always seemed to be staring at herself in mirrors, as if searching for something.

“Tell me about the Garden Service in detail after the banquet.” Li Jianting adjusted her golden hairpin and turned toward the entrance of her palace, away from that reflection.

Fengquan came forward to offer his arm in support.

Li Jianting took a few steps forward into the light falling across the ground. She lowered her eyes to her feet. The polished floor reflected the sky outside, making her feel as though she stood amid the clouds. She appeared strangely childlike at this moment. She didn’t move for a long time, as though reluctant to draw away from the scene.

Fuman, waiting outside, bowed before walking up the steps to stand by the door. “Your Highness,” he said softly. “It’s time.”

Fengquan felt the weight of her hand on his arm. The breeze after the rain stirred the golden hairpin in the heir apparent’s hair. The butterfly ornament spun around in a circle and bumped lightly into her neat coiffure.

Li Jianting stepped outside.

As soon as Han Cheng dismounted his carriage at the palace gates, he spotted the Helian Marquis. He appeared to have been waiting a long time. When he saw Han Cheng, he hurried up to greet him, and the two walked into the palace side by side.

“Where have you been?” the Helian Marquis hissed. “The Chief Surveillance Bureau is impeaching me now, saying I’ve seized the commoners’ fields. Baseless nonsense!”

Rotating two walnuts in his hand, Han Cheng said, “Do you think Cen Yu will believe that? Pan Lin gave him the account books—he has a reference for all the eight cities’ field taxes.”

“Then we have to think of a way.” The Helian Marquis followed a step behind Han Cheng and lowered his voice further. “They’re keeping the empress dowager confined. I can’t even see her now.”

Privately, Han Cheng thought that the empress dowager was now a clay Buddha crossing a river—unable to save herself, let alone anyone else. The ministers had already pursued the tax accounts all the way to the city of Chuancheng. Kong Qiu and the others had been relentless in their

investigation; they clearly planned to see it through to the end. Han Cheng had been losing sleep over it for days. Stroking his growing beard, he said, "I'm anxious too, but what good is worrying?" He cast a glance at the back of the eunuch leading the way and whispered to the Helian Marquis, "The heir apparent fell sick, but she recovered without any ill effects. What can we possibly do about that?"

"As if Fuman is some loyal and righteous thing?" Their brisk pace was making the Helian Marquis sweat. "These eunuchs don't even know those words. We all know what kind of poison Swift Pursuit is. I don't believe a thing he says. He must have tampered with it. He probably didn't dare offend the Grand Secretariat. And isn't he serving right at the heir apparent's side now? They're all a lowly bunch."

The eunuchs withdrew to the sides as they arrived at the banquet hall. Han Cheng tucked the walnuts into his robes. He gave a slight nod to the guards nearby and said to the Helian Marquis, "Come to my manor after the banquet. There're too many people around; this isn't the place to talk."

The Helian Marquis was burning with anxiety, but he had no choice; he acquiesced silently and followed Han Cheng into the hall.

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Chapter 239:
Jianting

PARTICULAR ATTENTION had been paid to the seating arrangements during the banquet for the Hanshi Festival. When Han Cheng took his seat, he found Qi Zhuyin to his left. Flicking his wrist to settle his sleeve, he asked, "Marshal Qi, when are you planning to return to Qidong? The rain comes and goes so abruptly this time of year; the roads will be rough."

The eunuch beside Qi Zhuyin was pouring wine. The vessels in the palace were exquisite in both form and design, a sight to behold when filled with amber wine. Qi Zhuyin rotated her goblet, studying it. "Bianjun, too, has been requesting our return. I ought to have left a long time ago, but the rain in Qudu won't let up. I'm in a tough spot here."

Ain't that the truth. Han Cheng sneered to himself. The question of grain for Qi Zhuyin's troops was still up in the air—how could the Grand Secretariat let her leave? The lives of ministers like Kong Qiu and their families all hinged on the Qidong Garrison Troops. They were hoping against hope that Qi Zhuyin could remove Han Cheng from the equation before she quit Qudu.

He turned to Qi Zhuyin. "Head out of the capital and go south along the Mount Feng training grounds. There's a road leading directly to Hezhou. It's newly constructed—runs along the Kailing River. Discuss the rest with the Ministry of War later, Marshal Qi. It'll be much faster that way. Once the war with the Qingshu tribe is over, there will still be other tribes. The garrison troops from all five commanderies are awaiting your command. I get anxious just thinking about it."

Although Han Cheng was a narrow-minded man, he was unusually well-informed. No doubt he had to have *some* actual substance to be able to sit at the same table with Cen Yu and the others. He had traveled often outside the capital on assignments and was familiar with all the routes. Qi Zhuyin wouldn't be able to hide troop movements from him.

"Just waiting for the opportunity." Qi Zhuyin set her cup down. "It's hard to say when it'll be at this point."

As they conversed, the young marquis Fei Shi arrived at the hall. Fei Shi and Pan Lin had been close friends. He had taken ill following the news of Pan Lin's death and no longer caroused at his usual haunts. It had become rare to catch sight of him.

Qi Zhuyin watched him pass. "I heard the young marquis joined the Eight Great Battalions?"

"Pan Chengzhi's death shook him badly. He suddenly woke up and wanted to find some occupation." Han Cheng sipped his wine. "Of course, there are no vacancies among the civil ministers. Only the Eight Great Battalions can take him at the moment, so I had him transferred to the Chunquan Battalion."

This battalion was equipped with firearms. Qi Zhuyin at once thought back to those firearms in the possession of King Yi of Fanzhou, and at the same time remembered the Scorpion infiltrator in Qudu. She heaved a sigh and met Han Cheng's eyes. "Commissioner."

Han Cheng rushed to lean forward in an exaggerated show of attentiveness.

Qi Zhuyin's expression was grave. "I'm starving."

Han Cheng burst out laughing. "I suppose Marshal Qi hasn't been in Qudu enough in the past few years if you didn't remember to fill your stomach before the banquet." He lowered his voice. "It's all cold food at the Hanshi Festival. The spread served during the Mid-Autumn Festival is much nicer, with fine wine and crabs, and the beautiful sight of the moon and flowers one can admire from the imperial garden."

The two chatted merrily until the eunuch outside the hall announced the empress dowager's arrival in a resounding voice. Everyone rose to their feet and retreated behind the small tables, where Kong Qiu led them all to kneel and prostrate themselves as they paid their respects.

The empress dowager wore a twelve-dragons-and-phoenixes crown inlaid with gold and precious gems, as well as earrings adorned with eastern pearls. In her stately dress and flawless poise, she showed no hint of the weariness that came with suffering a political setback. She elegantly took her seat and bade the assembly to rise, then uttered nothing more. The

officials bowed again, and once they finished their obeisance, the heir apparent, Li Jianting, stepped into the hall.

Qi Zhuyin could hold her drink reasonably well, but the few toasts she had made to Han Cheng during their idle talk were all politely declined. Without his blade, Han Cheng was cautious. He kept his eyes on the entrance of the hall, where he had set his own guards.

Kong Qiu led the officials to toast the empress dowager, then the heir apparent. The feast was in full swing when Fuman directed the eunuchs to serve the banquet dishes. The scholar-officials from the Hanlin Academy made one witty remark after another, causing the officials at the feast to double over laughing. Even the empress dowager's expression relaxed a fraction.

When everyone was served, Li Jianting rose to toast the empress dowager.

The empress dowager looked at her affectionately. "What a good child. You do truly resemble the Guangcheng Emperor. I'll feel so reassured leaving the empire in your hands in the future."

But Li Jianting was already of age to sit on the throne—when was this *future* she spoke of?

The heir drank all the wine in her cup, still bowed at the waist. A faint flush crept into her cheeks, making her look bashful. Playing the role of a filial child to the empress dowager's compassionate mother, she demurred, "This imperial grandchild is dense and has limited knowledge of political affairs. I cannot say when I'll reach the light of understanding, so I will surely still need Imperial Grandmother to supervise and exhort me daily."

She still had yet to be brought into the real affairs of government. Before the Dancheng tax case, all she'd heard in Mingli Hall were the official reports submitted by the Grand Secretariat. There were indeed many political issues on which her understanding was scant. But Kong Qiu and the others had been teaching her carefully and intentionally, analyzing and dissecting the details of current events during their lessons, so this self-deprecating speech was merely a string of polite banalities.

The empress dowager drank the wine along with Li Jianting.

Before the heir apparent ascended the throne, all affairs of government administration were to be decided by the Grand Secretariat, which was helmed by Kong Qiu, the minister assisting the ruler in governance. The authority of the empress dowager to act on behalf of the Son of Heaven was originally a symbolic right to annotate, endorse, and make decisions on memorials. Yet the empress dowager, with the noble clans and the Eight Great Battalions behind her, had become used to steering the court, and had long deviated from the mere mentorship Li Jianting spoke of.

Li Jianting backed away, still bowing. An attendant stepped up to refill her wine cup, and she toasted Kong Qiu, teacher and pupil bowing to each other. She did the same down the ranks until she came before Han Cheng.

Reed pipes played in the hall around them. The hanging drapes at the entrance had been lowered, shrouding the door in shadows.

Han Cheng returned her bow. When he drained his cup, Li Jianting said, “Commander Han was the late emperor’s right-hand man and the commissioner of our capital’s troops. I have the highest esteem for your meticulous work and valuable service.”

As she spoke, Fuman refilled her wine cup. Han Cheng quickly replied, “Your Highness thinks too highly of this old subject; I’m not deserving of such praise.”

Li Jianting smiled. Traces of exhaustion from her illness were still visible in her face, and this one smile unexpectedly appeared especially gentle. She joked, “My teacher is the Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat, and Commander Han is a seasoned veteran of the Embroidered Uniform Guard. How can I favor one over the other?”

Hearing Li Jianting putting him on a pedestal alongside Kong Qiu and piling on the flattery, Han Cheng assumed the heir had been frightened by her near brush with death and wanted to ingratiate herself with both sides by playing peacemaker.

Han Cheng held up the wine cup with both hands and faced Li Jianting. “This subject is an uncultured oaf. How would I dare compare myself to the Grand Secretary? Your Highness, a toast to you.”

Li Jianting looked at Han Cheng as she demurely covered her mouth with her sleeve and drank her wine. Fuman filled her cup back up immediately. The wine vessel Han Cheng held was different from a goblet, with a deeper base and a larger capacity. Just two rounds later, Han Cheng had broken out in a sweat and had no wish to drink any more.

"Your Highness." Han Cheng's alcohol tolerance was passable, but as he got a little tipsy and remembered all his men were in earshot just outside the hall, he couldn't help but let down his guard. "Your Highness is still young. The Grand Secretariat rules over all administration of governmental affairs, but you inevitably neglect to inquire about military ones. The Grand Secretariat wants to cut the military expenses of the capital's troops this year. This won't do, Your Highness. Our battalions shoulder the duty of both patrols and defenses. We don't even have a decent training ground, and now to cut our expenses? It's—"

Kong Qiu stood one respectful step behind Li Jianting. He frowned. "No talk of politics tonight. Why are you grousing about all these matters to Her Highness?"

Now with some wine in his stomach, Han Cheng grasped the wine cup and offered Kong Qiu a skin-deep smile. "Boran, you people have forced my hand; what can I do but voice my difficulties to Her Highness in person? The Chief Surveillance Bureau has pushed the Helian Marquis into a corner. He's an honest man, but Cen Xunyi berates him until he's lost all face. But never mind, Your Highness. Just treat it as idle chatter."

Cen Yu stood up from his own small table and bowed to both the empress dowager and Li Jianting before turning to Han Cheng. "The Chief Surveillance Bureau is in charge of impeachments. It is our duty to diagnose the maladies of the imperial court. Chuancheng lies close to Mount Feng drill grounds and has access to the waterways of Dicheng. If there is a discrepancy with regard to its taxes, then it is our duty as imperial censors to bring it up. A joint trial has yet to be convened for the Chuancheng case, and the Grand Secretariat has yet to actually press charges against the Helian Marquis. How can you say I've pushed him into a corner? Seems to me it's the common folk of Chuancheng who are the victims here."

The music in the hall gradually came to a stop. All the court officials fell silent.

Han Cheng burned with humiliation. He hated seeing these officials from humble backgrounds up on their high horses. He had hated it before he rose to the top, and now that he held Qudu's life in his hands, it made his blood boil that Cen Yu dared rebuke him like this in public. Swallowing his anger, Han Cheng said with a smile, "Xunyi, you and I are old acquaintances. I know you. If a joint trial has yet to be called for Chuancheng, it means the document has not been officially approved. The evidence presented still needs to be verified. You mustn't jump to rash conclusions."

The Helian Marquis had no troops and no power, and his clandestine accounts had been disclosed to the Ministry of Revenue by the late Pan Lin. He was now just an ant on a hot pan, consumed with anxiety. Even if he was resentful, he only dared to speak of it in confidence. Seeing that this conversation was about to escalate into a real argument and disrupt the banquet, the marquis set down his chopsticks and got to his feet. "Let's not talk about politics during the banquet," he urged them. "No politics!"

Han Cheng handed his empty cup to a eunuch and bowed again to Li Jianting. "I have marred Your Highness's enjoyment."

Li Jianting also handed her empty goblet to Fuman. "No need to take it to heart, Commander. But…"

But?

Han Cheng looked up, confused.

A gust of wind blew in from the door, and the drapes fluttered. Li Jianting raised a hand to the hair at her temple, which seemed to have gotten mussed as she drank. As her fingertips brushed the golden hairpin, she said to Han Cheng, her words clear and distinct, "A toast I may share with you. My blade once drawn, however, yields no mercy."[2]

The drapes fell, and the doors slammed shut with a thunderous *bang*. Han Cheng's eyes widened as he scrambled backward. In his panic, he knocked over a small table; the cups and utensils crashed to the ground. "Your Highness!"

Qi Zhuyin slammed a fist against her table, jolting the porcelain plates and bowls. She snatched up a golden chopstick and thrust it up toward the side of Han Cheng's neck. Han Cheng blocked the blow with a wave of his sleeve. A *clang* rang out as the chopstick struck his arm—he was wearing chain mail under his official's robe, and guards on his arms.

Enraged, Han Cheng grabbed the leg of one of the small tables and hurled the whole thing at Li Jianting. "Harlot! How dare you try to kill me?!"

Faced with Han Cheng's fury and hearing the clatter of booted footsteps outside the hall, Fuman cowered back, still holding his tray. Beside him, Kong Qiu had thrown himself in front of Li Jianting, and his forehead caught the brunt of the table. He shoved Li Jianting backward, paying no heed to the blood trickling from his head. As everyone in the hall stared, he shouted, "Don't listen to him! If we don't eradicate this traitor, there will be no peace in the nation! Kill him! *Quickly!*"

Hearing the shouts inside, the guards slammed against the doors with a thunderous crash. Fengquan rushed a few junior eunuchs forward to hold the bolt in place. The officials in the hall were frozen in terror. The Helian Marquis, unsteady on his feet, reeled back and muttered, "What is this…!"

Li Jianting stumbled as she backed away and fell to the ground. Heart pounding, she clutched the hairpin. She could see Fengquan swaying as the soldiers slammed against the door from the other side. "Hold the door!" she commanded sharply. "Han Cheng attended the banquet in armor and set his soldiers to surround the palace. His treacherous ambition is plain for all to see! If he does not die here tonight, it will be us who perish!"

In the confusion, Cen Yu didn't look where he was stepping and tripped over a wine vessel. Xue Xiuzhuo caught hold of him. Cen Yu waved his arms toward the interior of the hall. "With Han Cheng dead, the rebel forces will be without a leader! Marshal Qi's reinforcements are coming. Fear not, everyone!"

He led by example and threw himself at the door, joining the eunuchs in holding it closed.

Han Cheng traded several blows with Qi Zhuyin but swiftly gained the advantage with his well-honed martial arts skills and armor. He flung her to the ground, sending the pearls from her hairpin skittering over the

floor. Not daring to hesitate, she rolled away a breath before Han Cheng's booted foot stomped down on the spot where she had been.

"Qi Zhuyin!" Han Cheng spat on the ground. "I put up with you until now. You certainly think highly of yourself, huh? Want to kill me? Better get your old man over here!"

Qi Zhuyin didn't have Banisher with her. Few were fiercer than her when it came to leading a brute-force charge on the battlefield, but she was at a disadvantage in such close-range combat against a more sophisticated martial artist like Han Cheng. She backed up a few steps, coming up alongside Hua Xiangyi's table. Just as it seemed she would be forced all the way back to the empress dowager, she swept up Hua Xiangyi's unfinished cup and tilted her head back to down the wine. She smashed the porcelain cup and pinched a broken shard between her knuckles, then wiped her mouth.

"Didn't you hear?" Qi Zhuyin was frank. "My old man had a stroke."

Han Cheng launched his fist at Qi Zhuyin's face. She turned to dodge the blow and raised her empty hand to grab Han Cheng's arm and twist it back.

Han Cheng didn't move an inch.

Qi Zhuyin, though thwarted, held tight and kicked Han Cheng in the ribs. Han Cheng knew she usually wielded an executioner's blade, but he hadn't expected a mere woman to have such grip strength. Unable to break free of her grasp, he took the full force of the kick. The pain stoked his ruthless nature, and he let loose a furious bellow. Repeated thuds rang out as he smashed his elbow into Qi Zhuyin in an attempt to shake her off.

They broke apart, then dove right back into the fight, stomping the detritus of tableware into powder under their feet as they moved.

The imperial courtiers blocking the door were all civil officials with no martial prowess at all. They relied solely on their courage as they struggled against the guards on the other side of the door. As the gap in the door grew wider, Fengquan could see the ferocious expressions of the guards outside. He spat at the guards and cursed in a shrill voice, "Despicable scum! You serve a son of a bitch and dream of living the high

life. Keep fucking dreaming! Push again, and I'll flay you down to the bowels!"

He was delicate and refined in appearance. Since returning to the palace with the heir apparent, he'd seemed to undergo a change of temperament and didn't dare be haughty. He acted meek and kept his head down no matter who he was speaking to. But now he threw caution to the wind, cursing the guards in a stream of crude and scathing words. The officials cursed as well, but they were all men of letters; even if they wracked their brains, they cursed with rhythmic flow, aesthetic sense, and literary grace. Hearing Fengquan firing off expletives like a string of fireworks, their morale was greatly boosted.

Inside the hall, Han Cheng was ready to end this. He twisted Qi Zhuyin's incoming fist as if to tear her arm out of its socket. Qi Zhuyin let herself be pulled, using the momentum to twist through the air overhead. Han Cheng's fist caught a glancing blow on her cheek as she landed. The impact sent her crashing into a small table nearby. As she propped herself up, she tasted blood and felt an ache in her tooth.

This old dog was truly a martial expert who'd wormed his way into Ji Lei's old command. His inaction had concealed his true abilities. Had he been facing Xiao Chiye, with his fearsome arm strength and mastery of Ji-Style Boxing, he would have had a harder time—but he had the upper hand against Qi Zhuyin.

Han Cheng pressed in, raising a leg to kick Qi Zhuyin across the room. Qi Zhuyin brought both arms up to block and grabbed the leg about to strike her waist. Lifting it high, she flung him to the ground. At the same moment, Kong Qiu charged forward, holding a wine jar above his head. It was too late to smash it on Han Cheng; he tossed it aside and simply latched on to Han Cheng's left arm in a death grip.

Han Cheng struggled in Kong Qiu's hold. Before he could roll over and get up, Xue Xiuzhuo kicked over a small table and rushed to their aid. He grasped the legs of the table and pinned Han Cheng's right arm beneath its surface.

Trapped, Han Cheng's face contorted as he thrashed. He hissed, "You despicable sheep!"

Qi Zhuyin leapt to her feet and pounced, the shard of porcelain between her fingers aimed straight for Han Cheng's throat. Han Cheng heaved his body upward and managed to take the blow on his armored chest. The shard whispered past his neck, drawing out the barest trail of blood. He'd opened his mouth to shout when Fuman lunged forward and wrapped his arms around Han Cheng's torso, locking him in place through sheer force of will.

Fuman gasped and shouted, "Do it, Marshal Qi!"

"Castrated traitors know no loyalty!" Han Cheng's voice was frosty with shock and fury. "I should have killed you long ago!" He looked furious enough to shake them all off and stand—but before he could, Qi Zhuyin slammed her fist into his face so hard he fell over backward. Blood streamed from his nose. He spat in hatred, "You people are the real traitors for propping up Li Jianting! She's nothing but a whore—"

There was a wet *pop*, and Han Cheng threw his head back and howled in agony as pain seared through his left eye. Through the blood blurring his vision, he saw the golden butterfly of a hairpin fluttering above his cheek.

Han Cheng's voice trembled. He was a force already spent, an arrow at the end of its flight. "How…how dare you…"

Hand shaking, Li Jianting pulled out the hairpin. Blood splattered over her regal robe. When she saw Han Cheng was still not dead, she gritted her teeth, squeezed her eyes shut, and stabbed him over and over in the face and neck.

"Whore…you…" Han Cheng's voice stuttered. His right eye had been injured by Meng in the downpour the night Xiao Chiye had fled Qudu, and now his left eye was blinded by Li Jianting. He scarcely looked human, his features a bloody pulp and mouth opening and closing weakly. "To think…my…whole life… I…"

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His blood spilled down onto Fuman, still pinned under him, who shrieked in fear.

Heart hammering, Kong Qiu released his grip on Han Cheng's arm and confirmed he was dead. Only then did he heave a sigh of relief and fall backward onto the ground. Han Cheng collapsed, his neck skewed at an unnatural angle. He no longer moved.

Xue Xiuzhuo panted for breath. He stared at Li Jianting in disbelief. Her bloodstained hairpin clattered to the ground, the sound clear and crisp in the motionless room. Both of her hands were covered in blood. The sight of Han Cheng seemed to frighten her. She took half a step back, holding back the ragged gasps in her throat.

Livestock.

The hall was dead silent. Li Jianting's fingers shook violently as she wiped her face self-mockingly, as if wiping away girlish tears, but only left streaks of red across her cheek.

I'm not livestock.

Meeting Xue Xiuzhuo's gaze head-on, she slowly clenched her fists. Her eyes reddened. A conflicted expression twisted her face, as if she were both crying and laughing.

"I'm not…" Li Jianting squeezed the words from between her teeth. She whirled, facing the doors to the hall, and raised her right hand, as though at last grasping the power that had been beyond her reach. She said, each word clear: "Here stands the heir apparent. Who still wishes to be a treacherous fiend?"

The empress dowager gripped the armrests of her chair. Although she was still sitting high on her dais, in her mind, she seemed to have returned to the day she first entered the palace. That day, she had stood beneath the towering ceiling of the hall, looking up at the Guangcheng Emperor at the prime of his life and the peak of his supremacy. Raising his right hand, he'd said to her, *Here stands the Son of Heaven.*

A sovereign of the Li Clan.

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Chapter 240:
Abrupt

THE HEART-STOPPING HANSHI FESTIVAL banquet drew to a close. Xue Xiuzhuo removed Han Cheng's authority token from his limp body. Having lost their commander and fearing the majestic presence of legitimate royalty, Han Cheng's guards no longer dared to rashly charge forward. They believed Li Jianting's bold declaration; they retreated.

In the Han manor, outside the palace, the Eight Great Battalions' commanding generals all awaited orders. Wine flowed freely as they mingled. They had yet to receive any news.

"The commissioner still isn't back. Could he have been kept back by that Kong Boran?"

A scion of the Han Clan reclining on the couch took a harsh drag on his pipe and snorted. "Kong Boran may not get along with our commissioner, but we have the military in our hands. Our twenty thousand troops can surround the palace at a moment's notice. What are they going to do about it? A bunch of scholars too weak to even truss a chicken. Are they really going to pin their hopes on Qi Zhuyin? She won't walk out of this alive either."

Hua Shisan listened to the opera singers on the low stage and hummed along, head bobbing and folding fan tapping rhythmically against his palm. "Commissioner Han is a great hero. How can those flimsy guards in the palace stand against him? You're worrying for nothing!"

This thirteenth son of the Hua Clan was a child of common birth. He had poked his nose into the Imperial Army's affairs a while back and been taught a harsh lesson by Xiao Chiye. Fearing to cross Xiao Chiye a second time, he'd scampered home to Dicheng and passed his time idling the days away. Only after Xiao Chiye left Qudu did he dare set foot in the capital again.

"Besides," Hua Shisan said smugly, raising his fan to point toward the sky, "Who would dare to lay a finger on the commissioner with my aunt

there?"

The young man from the Han Clan exhaled smoke, and the two traded a glance and laughed. Both of them were bunglers and layabouts, so neither looked down on the other for his mediocrity.

"Fei Shi will be here in a few days." The Han son motioned for a maidservant to stuff more tobacco into his pipe. "We should organize a feast to welcome him. He's been depressed since Pan Chengzhi's death."

Hua Shisan put away his folding fan and turned. "Honestly, it's just as well Pan Chengzhi died. If he hadn't, what was he going to do in exile in Huaizhou? We'd've had to off him sooner or later, and that would have ruined our friendship with Fei Shi. A tricky business."

Pan Lin had handed over the eight cities' ledgers to the Grand Secretariat. They'd have had to hold him to account, one way or another.

Not once did it cross these men's minds that Han Cheng would never return from the banquet. Since the reign of Yongyi, the Eight Great Battalions had lorded over Qudu. It was only during the Xiande years that Xiao Chiye's Imperial Army had threatened their status as the capital's own troops. After the Imperial Army left, they became Qudu's troops again, brazen and no longer bothering to be cautious.

They drank and made merry, the night growing late as they chatted.

Hua Shisan drank until he was tipsy. He leaned back in his chair and propped his legs on a footrest, shouting for the singer to come give him a calf massage. He pinched the girl's cheeks and teased, "How old are you, little miss? I haven't seen you around before."

The Han son behind him tilted his head back and bragged, "You know who she is? She's a famous performer in Qudu, trained by Xi Hongxuan himself! Once you step out this door, you won't find anyone like her anywhere else."

They took turns teasing the singer, their language growing more and more obscene. Outside, the watchman stuck his clapper, and the maidservants in the manor stepped under the eaves to light the lamps.

All was quiet in Qudu.

Qidong's garrison troops, led by Qi Wei, silently disposed of the deputy general guarding the city gates and crept into the city. Qi Wei kept an eye on the time. Dawn was still a few hours off when he raised a hand and signaled his subordinates to surround the Han manor.

Hua Shisan was nodding off when he felt the urge to piss. He rose to go relieve himself. As he strode down the walkway, he glimpsed a faint light ahead. When his eyes finally focused, he recognized the glow of fire.

He was so scared he forgot about his bladder. Holding his pants up, he ran after a maidservant. "Why isn't anyone putting out the fire? Hurry! Tell the troops waiting in the side courtyard to fetch water and put it out!"

This was Han Cheng's manor. If he returned in the morning to find his house burned down, they would all have to bear the consequences.

While Hua Shisan looked around frantically, the Han Clan son and the others all flooded out, following the noise. Looking out from under the eaves, they too saw the fire growing in the distance.

"What's going on?" The Han Clan son tensed up. "Why hasn't it been put out?!"

A manor guard ran into the courtyard. "There's something strange about this fire! It flares and then goes out. Someone must be setting it deliberately! Sixth Master, please come to the door and see—the capital troops shall heed your command!"

The Han clan son didn't dare shirk his responsibility now. He dragged Hua Shisan and the men beside him along. They hurried toward the main entrance, but before they reached it, they heard shouts ahead: "They're charging in!"

The color drained from Hua Shisan's face. "Who?! Who's charging in?!"

The servants around them were thrown into disorder. One answered, "We can't see! It's all dark. They came to the door and struck down every capital soldier they saw. They're forcing their way in!"

The Han Clan son dropped his pipe in shock. He took a few steps forward, holding up his robe, then shrank back. "Quick! Send a deployment order! Summon all the men at the training ground here as reinforcements!"

But he didn't have Han Cheng's authority token, and without it, there was no way to mobilize the soldiers at the training ground.

The sound of fighting in the front courtyard pressed toward them, unchecked by the battalion soldiers at the entrance. Seeing the situation going south, Hua Shisan didn't bother to wait for the others as he ran toward the back door of the estate, following the clusters of servants. The Han Clan son couldn't even hold a blade, and on seeing his companion fleeing, he followed suit and took to his heels.

Qi Wei broke through the door with a torch in hand, looking around. He disregarded the chaos in the courtyard and cut down any battalion soldier he came across. The men of the Eight Great Battalions hardly ever left Qudu; aside from the night they had drawn their blades to surround Xiao Chiye in the palace, they had never encountered such a fierce fighter. The battalion commanders cowered in retreat, and the soldiers under them followed suit as the Qidong Garrison Troops drove them back again and again.

The garrison troops quickly doused the fire. The Eight Great Battalions were scattered all over the city, with no consistent lines of communication. If the fire raged out of control, it would no doubt draw unwanted attention. By the time the fire in the Han manor was put out, bodies were strewn over the courtyard. Qi Wei didn't let Hua Shisan and the others go either, hacking down that bunch of idle young masters along with their men. Only the lad from the Han clan escaped by worming his way out of a dog hole in the wall.

As the first glimmer of dawn materialized on the horizon, the court officials escorted Li Jianting to Mingli Hall. A series of imperial edicts were rapidly issued—first to rescind the Han Clan's noble title, then to sternly denounce Han Cheng for his crimes. He was accused of conspiring to rebel against the state, for which the penalty was the confiscation of all the Han Clan's properties and the execution of the entire clan. The Han Clan descendants in Wucheng were a diverse and numerous bunch, and on hearing the news, every last one of them took their valuables and fled.

Within a few short days, the winds in Qudu shifted. The common people on the streets were still puzzled as to what had happened when a

new master stepped onto the throne in the imperial palace.

The empress dowager took to her bed with illness. Despite her busy schedule, Li Jianting still made a show of attending her out of respect for her position as her paternal grandmother, the grand empress dowager. Every day, she personally sampled her medicine and kept watch by her bedside.

Cen Yu submitted a memorial to exalt the heir's virtue and filial piety, prompting a chorus of praise from the court and the people alike. The empress dowager, though well-tended, was old and frail; the calls for the heir's ascension to the throne grew louder by the day.

"The storm in Qudu has subsided." Yao Wenyu sprinkled bait for the brocade carp in the pond. "Marshal Qi should return to Bianjun soon."

"Ce'an has already gone back to the front lines. By the time Marshal Qi returns, it will be time for him to head south as well." Shen Zechuan turned toward the sunlight and examined the jade pendant in his palm. "Han Cheng died too easily."

The news had only just arrived.

The remains of the bait stuck to Yao Wenyu's fingers. "The empress dowager is too powerless to salvage this hopeless situation, especially when the noble clans insist on digging their own graves. The heir apparent will surely confer a title upon the marshal once she ascends the throne. She'll want the assurance of the marshal's loyalty."

Turning the jade pendant in his hand, Shen Zechuan laughed.

"Your Lordship ordered Ge Qingqing back to Qudu, yet you wouldn't let him make any moves," Yao Wenyu continued. "You must have some greater plan for him."

"Don't worry about Ge Qingqing. He won't be needed until the heir apparent takes the throne." Shen Zechuan glanced at Yao Wenyu. "I'm looking forward to it."

The tender branches of the willow beside the pond swayed as Hunu pounced after a butterfly and scampered up to Yao Wenyu's legs, fur covered in dust. Yao Wenyu lowered his hand to stroke her. "Your Lordship is farsighted."

"Xue Yanqing wanted a sovereign. To think the heavens gave him one." Shen Zechuan smiled. "But how could a truly strong sovereign allow herself to bend to the will of others?"

"You think she's wary of him," Yao Wenyu replied softly.

"That's right." Shen Zechuan watched the swarm of brocade carp scatter. They floated near the water's surface as if satiated. "Xue Yanqing is a minister with great power."

Xue Xiuzhuo had played a pivotal role in putting the heir apparent on the throne, as well as in auditing the eight cities' field taxes. He didn't covet, coerce, or form cliques, but he wielded immense power. A smart emperor didn't fear powerful ministers, but they most certainly feared powerful ministers who had no desires and made no demands.

"If Xue Yanqing wants to assuage her worries, then he ought to give the heir some leverage on him," Shen Zechuan said. "Even if he has to pull it out of thin air, he has to give her some peace of mind."

If Xue Xiuzhuo had no vulnerabilities, then the throne had no way to control him, and therefore no way to maintain the balance of power.

Yao Wenyu considered this. "That's the way Xue Xiuzhuo is. He won't give the heir a handle on him if he can help it."

"Then he's in danger," Shen Zechuan said with heavy meaning.

The line between loyal and treacherous was often a blurred one, and the right to determine which side someone fell on lay in Li Jianting's hands. Shen Zechuan had deduced what had happened during the Hanshi Festival banquet from Ge Qingqing's report. The heir apparent, it seemed, was no delicate flower Xue Xiuzhuo had transplanted into the palace garden. Like a bramble bush, she had taken root beside the throne and was rapidly growing around it, with a perseverance that far surpassed that of her competitors.

"Now that Han Cheng is dead, there's no point in keeping Han Jin. Send him back to Wucheng," Shen Zechuan said to Fei Sheng, as though he had only just remembered Han Cheng's brother was still in his hands.

Fei Sheng had thought Shen Zechuan determined to keep Han Jin; he never expected him to cast the man away so casually. He privately thought it a pity, though he didn't dare speak out of turn.

"The Zhou empire is in shambles. It remains to be seen how many powerful figures the emperor can command." Yao Wenyu was maneuvering his own wheelchair today. "The heir apparent will not invite conflict with Xue Xiuzhuo at this time. Far more pressing now is the situation in the Bianjun Commandery. Marshal Qi plans to seize the Qingshu tribe's territory in the fifth month. At that point, the neighboring Youxiong tribe will find they can't afford to watch from afar any longer. I fear there will be another great battle when the time comes."

"Qidong has ample provisions; Qi Zhuyin isn't afraid of a battle. Zhongbo, on the other hand, will not feed idle men. Haerigu has been eating our grain for nearly half a year. It's time he went out for a walk."

Yao Wenyu understood. "Your Lordship means to send him to negotiate with the Youxiong tribe."

"I've heard Amur is only the leader of six of the tribes. The Youxiong tribe has yet to join him." Eyes on the surface of the water, Shen Zechuan said, "The Qingshu tribe's lands belong to Amur, while their provisions were sent to Hassen on the northern battlefields. Now, the Youxiong tribe is forced to fight for their sustenance as well. But food is one thing we don't lack."

Amur had used the Scorpions to fracture the Zhou empire. Now that Shen Zechuan had Scorpions of his own, it would be a waste not to use them. He needed Haerigu to start earning his keep.

"The Qingshu tribe, the Youxiong tribe, Gedal, the Huiyan tribe in the north." Shen Zechuan looked back at Yao Wenyu. "Connecting these three under my rule will be my New Year's gift to Amur."

What Amur had stolen from Zhongbo, Shen Zechuan could never get back—but he could make Amur pay in other ways. If one were to draw a line from the territory of the Qingshu tribe north through the territory of the Huiyan tribe, it would just so happen to stretch right along the banks of the Chashi River.

"Duanzhou's defensive wall is still not thick enough." The tassel at the end of Shen Zechuan's fan swayed as he moved. "Coincidentally, the same goes for the Youxiong tribe."

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Chapter 241:
A Good Woman

THE RAIN IN QUDU finally came to a stop, and at last, it was time for Qi Zhuyin to head home. She picked up Hua Xiangyi at the entrance of the palace. Though the carriage was right beside them, she affixed Banisher to her waist and said to Hua Xiangyi, "Let's go for a walk."

Hua Xiangyi noted that Qi Zhuyin's broken hairpin was still in her hair, the empty golden thread dangling as though it was never intended to hold pearls. The marshal didn't seem at all ruffled—that was, if one overlooked her bruised face.

Qi Wei gestured for the carriage to follow him, then began to walk only after Qi Zhuyin and Hua Xiangyi strode some distance ahead.

A warm breeze drifted through the marketplace near the palace, where the crowd bustled amid the humid smells of sweat and fried food. Even the blooming spring flowers in the distance seemed coated in a layer of grease, making Qi Zhuyin feel half suffocated.

As they passed by a stall selling sugar figurines, Qi Zhuyin turned to Hua Xiangyi. "Want one?"

The stall was just off the main path. People and carriages came and went in a steady stream, sending clouds of dust into the air. Hua Xiangyi was the precious pearl of the Hua Clan. Before coming to Qudu, she rarely left her residence; she had lived out her days deep in the inner courtyards—a sheltered, pampered life. She looked at Qi Zhuyin, who fished out a few loose coppers from her sleeve pocket and flicked them in her palm. Amid the jingle of the coins, Qi Zhuyin murmured, self-satisfied, "I have money."

This street was dim in the gathering dusk, but as Qi Zhuyin pulled the corners of her bruised lips into a smile, the lanterns behind her lit up one after another. For a moment she looked like a maiden just come of age who had run out to the market to play, with nothing on her mind save the beautiful candy.

Clutching her handkerchief, Hua Xiangyi pointed to a figurine. “This one.”

She suddenly felt bashful, a subtle emotion concealed between her brows. This was something she had never done before; something she never would have done before.

Qi Zhuyin tossed the copper coins to the stallkeeper and handed the sugar figurine to Hua Xiangyi. She didn’t care if she had nothing left. She was used to being poor. Money never remained in her hands for very long.

Face composed, Hua Xiangyi carefully held the sugar figurine between her fingers and studied it by the light of the lanterns. There were sweets in the palace, and the empress dowager used to ask Aunt Liuxiang to keep them on hand for her. But she had only once caught a glimpse of a sugar figurine, through a crowd of her attendants—a brief flicker in the gap of her sedan’s fluttering curtain.

Qi Zhuyin tested a bruise on her face with a finger and turned to survey her reflection in a nearby water vat through the overlapping shadows.

She was of noble descent, but Hua Xiangyi had always felt she didn’t act the part. She was sanguine and broad-minded, resembling a wandering traveler more than a well-bred maiden. Hua Xiangyi had been in Qidong half a year, yet she had never seen Qi Zhuyin moved to anger. It was as if there was nothing the marshal found worth getting angry over.

“Does the marshal come here often?”

“All the loan sharks in Qudu are here. When I come, chances are it’s to borrow money.” She removed the hairpin and said a little regretfully, “This five-pearl pin was bestowed upon me by the imperial court. All this time, I never dared to sell it—if I’d known it would end up getting broken in the palace, I would’ve.”

“The estates in the countryside—”

“That’s what I wanted to tell you today,” Qi Zhuyin broke in. “You’ll be taking over management of all the family’s estates in the country and shops in the city. You can decide whether to rent them out or sell them.” She turned solemnly to face Hua Xiangyi. “Let’s lay our cards on the table.”

Qi Zhuyin didn't offer to move the conversation into a teahouse. She loved the downtown streets and the busy marketplace. She made a point by standing here—she wasn't afraid of anyone's scrutiny.

"I owe you thanks for your warning regarding the eight cities' granaries." Qi Zhuyin bowed slightly, her long hair sliding over her back. She straightened again. "Or this visit would really have been perilous."

Hua Xiangyi turned aside, evading the bow. "All the credit goes to Chengzhi."

Qi Zhuyin studied her. "Pan Lin was not the one who told me, so I'll thank you." Under Qi Zhuyin's steady gaze, Hua Xiangyi gripped the sugar figurine until it nearly melted.

"But I'll be blunt too," Qi Zhuyin went on. "Did you tell me about the eight cities' granaries because there's something you want me to do for you?" As always, her words were direct and to the point; she had never bothered with tact.

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This Third Lady Hua was a strange one too.

Qi Zhuyin had spent several nights tossing and turning, but she couldn't figure out why Hua Xiangyi would reveal the truth about the granaries to her. Had it not been for her timely hint, who could say what the outcome of this game might have been?

Amid the babble of voices, Hua Xiangyi looked down at the sugar figurine in her hand, revealing her smooth, white neck. "There's nothing I want from the marshal. Just…keep fighting the Biansha."

Qi Zhuyin gazed fixedly at Hua Xiangyi. All of a sudden, she bent over, bracing her hands on her knees, and cocked her head to examine Hua Xiangyi's expression. "That's all?" she asked in puzzlement.

Hua Xiangyi nearly jumped in fright. This was the same look Qi Zhuyin had had when she lifted the curtain of Hua Xiangyi's carriage, charging right up without giving Hua Xiangyi a chance to compose herself.

"You helped Yao Wenyu escape Qudu." Qi Zhuyin looked as if she'd woken up, her eyes sharper than ever. This close, she could smell Hua Xiangyi's pleasant scent—there was a hint of floral fragrance, just as she'd expected. When her wandering mind snapped back to reality, she realized Hua Xiangyi was still calmly holding the sugar figurine, waiting with rapt attention for her to continue.

"And you told me about the granaries." Qi Zhuyin corralled her wandering thoughts. "Is this because you married my father?"

"Chengzhi was the one who saved Yuanzhuo," Hua Xiangyi answered.

Qi Zhuyin shook her head and said with conviction, "It was you."

Hua Xiangyi pushed the credit onto others on all these occasions, as if she couldn't bear to admit it. The tether that held her back was the empress dowager's love and affection. The last sunset glow along the street was swallowed by the horizon, and the lanterns shone so bright they looked like fallen stars. The smell of frying food had dissipated slightly, although the streets were still hot and stuffy. Hua Xiangyi looked out of place here.

"During the reign of Xiande, my aunt would set arithmetic problems for me from time to time—most frequently during the spring plowing." Hua

Xiangyi lowered the sugar figurine, her eyes distant, as if she was plucking the shadows of the past. “In truth, all the numbers were from the accounts of the eight cities. The more I calculated, the more I understood. After Zhongbo fell, I advised my aunt to send Jiang Qingshan there, but she and the ministers deemed it enough for Jiang Qingshan to oversee the thirteen cities. That year, people starved to death in droves in Zhongbo, and in the years that followed, the six prefectures continued to starve due to the black-market grain trade from the eight cities. There have been far too many deaths.” She lifted her head slowly. “So many more than the Biansha massacre.”

Hua Xiangyi had grown up deep in the palace. She wore exquisite silks, feasted on delicacies, and slept on the softest satin, while those on the other side of those vermilion walls wore rags, sold their children for food, and huddled in the bitter cold. When she had stood with the empress dowager on the palace’s western tower and looked out into the distance, the illusion of prosperity had blinded her. But very quickly, she had realized that the noble clans never meant to stop what they were doing. Even after Hai Liangyi gave his life for this cause in Mingli Hall, the empress dowager never thought about changing her ways.

“I want my aunt to stop,” Hua Xiangyi said.

The common people were the rivers bearing the boats up, the foundation upon which the empire stood—yet the empress dowager still thought she could use the Eight Great Battalions to quash any dissent. To do so was to defy the very laws of nature. The rise and fall of an empire lay not in the hands of any one sovereign. What the people really needed was a ruler with a heart full of compassion for all the hardships of the world.

“I live within the bounds of a lady’s chamber, and my abilities are similarly limited. Compared to Yuanzhuo or Chengzhi, what I can do is insignificant.” Hua Xiangyi slowly returned Qi Zhuyin’s bow. “Marshal Qi, you ride all over Qidong and gallop across the battlefields of the south. If you can beat back the Twelve Tribes of Biansha, it would be a great service to all the people of this land. That’s why I want you to walk out of Qudu alive.”

Qi Zhuyin accepted her bow. She looked thoughtful, as if she only now saw who Hua Xiangyi really was.

“You’re a good woman.” Qi Zhuyin paused. “I’ll repay you with victories on the battlefield.”

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Chapter 242:
Youxiong Tribe

IT WAS THE FIFTH MONTH, the height of summer in Zhongbo, and the scorching heat was more than the advisors could bear. They hid within the water pavilion at the center of the pond, sipping tea, smoking pipes, and fanning themselves vigorously. Yu Xiaozai, after filling his stomach with tea fortified with cooling herbs, had begun to feel rather uncomfortable. Just as he was thinking about making his way over to the outhouse, he spotted Fei Sheng leading Haerigu into the courtyard.

"Er-ye will be riding through in the next couple of days." Yu Xiaozai wiped sweat from his neck with a handkerchief. "Will Haerigu join him?"

"He's a Scorpion." Kong Ling, mindful of his health, avoided the cold food; instead, he sat by the cascading sheet of water spilling over the pavilion's eaves to cool off. "He can negotiate with the Youxiong tribe."

This was at the prefectural governor's behest, so Yu Xiaozai couldn't protest. He nodded and shifted closer to Yao Wenyu. "I heard the people of the Youxiong tribe are unlike those of the other tribes in the desert. They're strong and sturdy, and they ride extraordinarily tall horses."

Gao Zhongxiong had never seen anyone from the Youxiong tribe before either. He lifted his brush from the paper. As he dipped it in the ink, he turned and waited with Yu Xiaozai for Yao Wenyu's answer.

Yao Wenyu closed the book on his lap. "The Youxiong are a large tribe in the desert's southwest. Before Amur rose to power, the strongest tribe in the desert was the Hanma tribe, followed by the Youxiong tribe. The Youxiong tribe used to reside east of Suotian Pass. They've always bred their own horses; they don't use the ponies from the Goushe tribe. The horses of the Youxiong tribe are called 'bear horses' after the totem of their clan, and the title is fitting. They're even bigger than the battle steeds of Libei."

Gao Zhongxiong had thought Yu Xiaozai was only repeating hearsay; he never expected it to be true. Alarmed, he said, "I heard rumors of the

Youxiong tribe back in the Imperial College too. Back then, the Feng clan was the one guarding Suotian Pass. Feng Yisheng, the Silver Spear of Snowy Pass! General Feng was the one who beat the Youxiong tribe back to the eastern side of the pass."

The four great generals of the Yongyi era were still renowned: Feng Yisheng, the Silver Spear of Snowy Pass; Xiao Fangxu, the Iron Wings of Old Hongyan; Qi Shiyu, the Thunder Drumbeat of Cangjun; and Lu Pingyan, the Flying White Frost of Bianjun. In those days, all the boys in the Zhou empire talked about hardly anything else. Like Xiao Fangxu, Feng Yisheng came from a humble background. At fourteen, he had reportedly pointed to the continuous range of snowy peaks at Suotian Pass and vowed to become Great Zhou's impregnable iron bastion. At forty, he had buried his youngest and last remaining son under those same snowy peaks. And eventually, he'd met his end in battle, leaving only his bone thumb ring to his adopted son, Zuo Qianqiu.

"Yuanzhuo is indeed worldly and wise," Kong Ling said. "You even know about the Youxiong tribe. In fact, Qidong's earliest battle steeds were bred from their bear horses. When Xiao Fangxu, the king of wolves, was a lowly soldier at Luoxia Pass, all the horses in the stables there came from Qidong, and they were also of this breed."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Yu Xiaozai marveled.

"When Amur first unified the four tribes of Hanma, Goushe, Liaoying, and Qingshu, he wanted the Youxiong tribe's allegiance too." Feeling a little too cool, Kong Ling got up and returned to the table. "They fought, and Amur lost."

This time, the interest of all three men was piqued, and they gathered around Kong Ling to listen.

"Those are the four tribes we're talking about—elites who can put even the Libei Armored Cavalry at a disadvantage," Gao Zhongxiong said.

"These were different times. The Youxiong tribe was still roaming the area around Suotian Pass back then. They occupied the high ground, and it proved tedious for the Hanma tribe to launch their attacks. Every time they charged the Youxiong tribe, the Youxiong beat them back." Kong Ling laughed as he painted the scene. "There were always Youxiong people appearing and disappearing among the meandering snowy peaks. Scimitars

in hand and clad in leather armor, they would charge down the mountain every time and kick the Hanma tribe right in the chest. The Hanma tribe would tumble all the way down the mountain—"

"Gallopin' ghosts!" Yu Xiaozai exclaimed.

Yao Wenyu almost choked on his tea. Covering his mouth with his handkerchief, he coughed a few times before regaining his composure.

"Indeed." Kong Ling smiled. "They fought until Amur was at the end of his rope. He had no choice but to move the Qingshu tribe next door to the Bianjun Commandery."

Wiping his face, Yao Wenyu said, "The Youxiong tribe has its great hero too. When General Feng was alive, the one who went toe to toe with him in battle was a man named Sukhebasu. He was the hero of the Youxiong tribe."

Gao Zhongxiong leaned in. "This Su—I know him! Yuanzhuo, I don't know if you remember the name. But I never got tired of listening to the legend of General Feng in the teahouse near the Imperial College when I first came to the capital. He and this Sukhebasu were like…the wolf king and Amur!"

"He certainly was a hero in his time," Kong Ling said. "If not for Amur, the Hanma tribe's current territories would be occupied by the Youxiong tribe instead, led by Sukhebasu. He was Feng Yisheng's foe, but also his friend. There was this one tale from the teahouses in Dengzhou—maybe it's completely fabricated—but it claimed that when Feng Yisheng shot through the eagle banner that symbolized the dignity of Biansha, Sukhebasu applauded. They looked at each other over the heads of thousands of soldiers and horses and roared with laughter. From then on, it was said they always greeted each other before a battle."

Gao Zhongxiong gripped his brush and struck a pose to imitate that teahouse storyteller. "General Feng, armorless, stood in the snow with his hands behind his back and his white robe flapping in the wind, the very picture of a dashing man. Sukhebasu, wrapped in his furs, cupped a fist to salute the general across the curtain of snow and, in a clear, carrying voice, called out—"

"Are the grain wagons for the armored cavalry ready?"

Gao Zhongxiong paused, arm extended. Before he could close his gaping mouth, he saw Kong Ling and the others all stand and bow to Shen Zechuan behind him.

"All is ready," Kong Ling said. "Fei Sheng checked them this morning. Qiao Tianya will escort them out of the city later."

Shen Zechuan tapped the back of Gao Zhongxiong's shoulder with his folding fan. "I am Sukhebasu, the Ferocious Tiger of the Youxiong tribe. I've brought along kumis from my homeland. I wish for the general to finish it before we fight."

In a fluster, Gao Zhongxiong abandoned his brush and turned to bow to the prefectural governor.

"No need to be nervous," Shen Zechuan said. "As they say, 'Of the snowy dreams of the boys of Zhou, who knows not of the Suotian spear?' Shifu used to love this part too."

Haerigu, standing outside the pavilion, chimed in: "Sukhebasu, the Ferocious Tiger of the Youxiong tribe. I know of him as well."

Fascinated by the story, Yu Xiaozai implored, "What happened to them after?"

Kong Ling didn't answer. Haerigu picked up a piece of fruit from the table and took a bite before continuing. "Sukhebasu killed Feng Yisheng's youngest son, and then Feng Yisheng. Later, Amur drove him out of Suotian Pass. He spent some time in Gedal before retreating behind the Qingshu tribe."

Sukhebasu had been a strange man.

Haerigu remembered him, the ferocious tiger of the legends. He had abandoned himself to drink and pleasure in Gedal. Every time he had too many cups, he had pounded on the drums and performed the dance in honor of the dead. That tall, strapping man had had streaks of white in his hair; he wasn't yet old then, but he'd had the look of a man already dead.

"I had a friend," Sukhebasu would say as he drank in the firelight. "He drank my kumis, and he killed my sons. I took my revenge on him, so he left me." He'd turned his empty wine skin upside-down. "We were the

brave eagles across the chasm, upon the snowy peaks. We had to perish at each other's hands."

"He died though. It was too bad." Haerigu finished his fruit. "He caught a cold in Gedal and was too ill to even get up. The Hanma tribe besieged him. He drank kumis in the tent by himself, then picked up his scimitar and died in battle in the desert. Gegenhas of the Hulu tribe cut off his head and gave it to Amur."

Yu Xiaozai uttered a quiet "ah" and said nothing more.

Everyone in the pavilion fell silent.

With Sukhebasu's head as an offering, Gegenhas had turned the Hulu tribe into Amur's friend. At the same time, he and his younger sister had also become Hassen's friends. Years later, Xiao Fangxu's horse stomped on Gegenhas's neck, breaking it. And a few more years later… Kong Ling quietly considered it all.

"Since Haerigu is going to the Bianjun Commandery, is Your Lordship still planning to send Huo Lingyun too?" Yao Wenyu asked, changing the subject.

"Huo Lingyun is not going to the Bianjun Commandery." Shen Zechuan turned to look through the curtain of water to where Huo Lingyun stood with his back straight. "He and his muskets are heading north."

The next day, Xiao Chiye led the armored cavalry through Duanzhou. Shen Zechuan stood on the road outside the city gates and watched the waves of yellow sand roll in. Meng wheeled down and screeched twice above Shen Zechuan's head, then banked up once more and winged southward.

As the thunder of the Libei Armored Cavalry's hooves swelled to a roar, Fei Sheng stepped up to shield Shen Zechuan from the sand; Shen Zechuan raised his folding fan to stop Fei Sheng from standing before him.

Snowcrest, in its heavy armor, snorted hot puffs of air. The horse galloped ahead of the billowing sand, leading the armored cavalry behind it. A smile spread over Shen Zechuan's face. He raised his right arm as Xiao Chiye drew closer, his wide sleeve sliding down to reveal his armguard.

Xiao Chiye didn't slow. Eyes fixed straight ahead, he lowered an arm as he passed Shen Zechuan. A single metallic note rang out as the two matching armguards met. Then, in the blink of an eye, he was gone.

The wind snatched at Shen Zechuan's robe. "To victory."

"To victory!" Xiao Chiye called, laughing as he spurred Snowcrest toward the blazing sun.

Amid the shimmering waves of heat and clouds of dust, the two men passed each other, neither looking back.

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Chapter 243:
Strive

THE BIANJUN COMMANDERY stood facing the desert, buffeted day and night by relentless wind and sand. Rarely could one glimpse the blue dome of heaven from atop its city walls. The dwellings in the commandery hunkered low, and all that could be seen if one squinted into the distance was a vast expanse of ochre. Greenery was sparse, and even after riding a few miles through the territory, it was lucky to spot a few crooked, sickly trees. Wild grass and weeds grew in uneven patches throughout the barren land, like the balding pate of an aging lord.

Xiao Chiye's helmet was covered in a layer of grime. He took it off and, with his back to the setting sun, gazed up at the city walls of the Bianjun Commandery, shimmering among the waves of sand.

"This place really is poor." Haerigu leapt off his horse, the necklace around his neck clanking noisily. He uncorked his waterskin and tilted his head back to pour water over his face. Eyes closed, he said, "No Scorpions would choose to come here."

There were no fields in Bianjun; the land underfoot was so barren it was already starting to crack under the scorching sun, though it was only the sixth month. Xiao Chiye shifted his boot and watched insects crawling between the crevices in the ground.

Haerigu brushed back his wet hair. "In the first year of Xiande, the grasslands east of Suotian Pass that Amur went to such effort to obtain were hit by a sandstorm and never recovered—it's all wasteland now. The Qingshu tribe abandoned it and retreated to the east of the Bianjun Commandery. His Lordship wants me to negotiate with the Youxiong tribe, but he didn't give me any bait to go fishing with. This business requires brains, and I have none."

Haerigu was dissembling—he knew how to negotiate. Given how he'd negotiated with Yan Heru, this Black Scorpion clearly understood the rules of the game. Shen Zechuan hadn't promised him anything specific if he succeeded, which had sent a clear message: Regardless of how good a

deal Haerigu managed to strike, Shen Zechuan would have the final say over his reward. Now it seemed Haerigu wanted to try his hand at bargaining with Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye didn't even look at him as he answered, "You'd better find some."

Haerigu rubbed the back of his neck, looking a little chagrined. The water he'd poured over himself quickly evaporated. His skin, long exposed to the sweltering sun, was tanned bronze. Haerigu sealed the waterskin and made another attempt. "I'll offer the Youxiong tribe food for the winter. If they're fed, they'll be able to stay in their territory."

"If that's all you can do," Xiao Chiye replied, his eyes following the movements of the desert shadows and settling upon the city gate of the Bianjun Commandery, "then anyone could negotiate this deal."

Having hit this brick wall yet again, Haerigu rubbed his congested nose. "All right, then. I'll give them new options." Ahead of them, the gate of the Bianjun Commandery was rising. Qi Zhuyin stood on the other side with her arms folded and her blade hanging from her waist. She had gone on reconnaissance the night before and not returned until just after noon. Having slept only four hours, her eyes were ringed with dark circles; she didn't look particularly happy to see Xiao Chiye.

"Hey," she said, "you're here."

Xiao Chiye tossed her his authority token. Qi Zhuyin caught it and handed it to Qi Wei without even looking at it. Then she turned around and led Xiao Chiye into the city.

"When I came here in the fourth year of Xiande, Lu Guangbai said he was going to plant some trees in this desert." Xiao Chiye's heavy armor was blistering hot under the last rays of the setting sun. "Why is it still so barren here?"

"Trees? In his dreams maybe." Qi Zhuyin's neck was sore from her nap, and she tilted her head this way and that to stretch. Watching the lanterns along the streets gradually flickering to life, she said, "The sandstorms were strong during the sixth year of Xiande. He saved up to buy a bunch of seedlings from Hezhou and planted them along the border that

spring. They barely survived to the end of the month before the horsemen trampled them flat."

"Was Hassen stationed with the Qingshu tribe at the time?" Xiao Chiye strode a few steps up the city wall and set his helmet down, then sat beside Qi Zhuyin to watch the cavalry enter the city.

"He was." Qi Zhuyin didn't sit, instead leaning against a doorframe, her chin dipped in the gold of sunset. "The letter you sent with Zhao Hui arrived a while back. There'll be a tough battle to fight in the sixth month—but only if Hassen really does head south to attack Duanzhou. If he doesn't come, Second Sand Camp will bear the consequences of the moves you're making now."

"Amur has won over the Hulu tribe, but he's still persuading the Youxiong tribe. Meanwhile, Hassen is running out of food. He'll have to raid Duanzhou for provisions or let his men go hungry."

"I see you brought along a Scorpion," Qi Zhuyin said. "What is Shen Zechuan planning?"

"If Hassen attacks Duanzhou, his reinforcements have to stop on the eastern bank of the Chashi River—at Gedal. The Youxiong tribe is the only Biansha tribe positioned to intercept me in the southeast." Xiao Chiye stretched out his legs. "Lanzhou wants to negotiate with them."

"Then he has to approach them with real sincerity." Qi Zhuyin straightened up and pointed toward the snowy peaks to the south. "Those bears used to have enormous pastures near Suotian Pass. Shen Zechuan's granaries can't fill their stomachs. They're greedy in ways you can't imagine."

Qi Zhuyin—no, as far back as Qi Shiyu—had attempted to negotiate with the Youxiong tribe on behalf of Qidong in the hope that they would defect to the Zhou empire as the Huiyan tribe had done in the north, but it had proved too difficult. The Youxiong tribe was strong; they were completely different from the Huiyan tribe, who had nothing. In their minds, they could win far better lands via their scimitars and their lumbering bear horses than anyone would dole out to them—which was also why they had never given Amur a second thought.

“Lanzhou will grant them the Hanma tribe’s territory,” Xiao Chiye said. “They’ve roamed up and down the desert since leaving Suotian Pass. Land of their own is the thing they want the most.”

Qi Zhuyin squatted and looked at Xiao Chiye. “See, you boys really are clever. The Youxiong tribe does want a homeland of their own. But are you the great king of the desert? The tricks Shen Zechuan used on the folks in Zhongbo won’t work here. You can’t draw cakes in the sand and expect them to start eating. I’ve dealt with those bears before; they are far more cunning than the Hanma tribe.”

In Duanzhou, Li Xiong was catching lizards. He knelt on the polished wooden planks under the eaves, holding one by the tail. “Grill it. It’s tasty.”

Ding Tao sat cross-legged, brush in hand, scribbling in his notebook. When he reached the end of his thought, he cast a glance at the lizard and wrinkled his nose. “Ew.”

Li Xiong swung the lizard lightly by its tail. “This is a snake of Gedal.”

Ding Tao hadn’t heard Li Xiong bring up Gedal and Lei Jingzhe in a long time. He flipped his notebook face down and looked at the lizard. “Isn’t this one the same as the lizards in Cizhou?”

Li Xiong sniffed the air before answering, “It’s not the same. This one has a smell—the smell of the desert, of yellow sand!”

“It fled all the way here from Gedal.” Ding Tao struck a pensive pose, finger to his chin. “Life in Gedal must have been tough. Living here will be much more comfortable.”

Li Xiong answered, “No, it would rather be—”

Fei Sheng yelled for Ding Tao from the other end of the walkway. Ding Tao scrambled to his feet to answer before Li Xiong could finish his sentence; the sweets he’d had tucked in his lap scattered over the ground.

“—back in its old home,” Li Xiong finished slowly. Eyes on Ding Tao’s retreating back, he picked up the sweets and stuffed the whole handful into his mouth. His voice was muffled as he said, “I liked my old home, too.”

The current chieftain of the Youxiong tribe was a man called Dalantai. He wasn't a relative of Sukhebasu, but a trusted soldier who'd fought under him. After Sukhebasu died in Gedal, Dalantai had fled into the territories east of the Qingshu tribe with the remainder of the Youxiong's elite troops and remained there for many years.

Dalantai sat before his tent and pulled a potato from the campfire. He broke it apart, still steaming, and ate it with some horse jerky dried in the sun. His beard was so thick he appeared rather comedic as he chewed. He was not imposing or majestic, as Sukhebasu had been. On the contrary, he was so short those who met him were often surprised he was from the Youxiong tribe.

"You have ridden your horse before my tent, oh wise one who traverses the desert. You bring an exhortation from the Heroic Eagle." Dalantai swallowed a scalding-hot mouthful and watched Bayim, who sat across the campfire. "But the demands of your leader are unreasonable."

"Chieftain of the bears beneath the snowy peaks." Sitting cross-legged, Bayim bowed at the waist. "I bring with me the most sincere greetings from the Heroic Eagle. Our requests are all negotiable, for the Heroic Eagle sees you all as friends."

The Heroic Eagle of the Hanma tribe was, of course, none other than Hassen. He had sent the wise man Bayim to meet Dalantai long before Xiao Chiye set out.

Dalantai offered the other half of the potato to Bayim. "The wolf pup of Libei is young and strong. I heard he killed Huhelu and Achi, and defeated the Heroic Eagle's proud Scorpions at the Chashi Sinkhole. I've grown too old to ride a horse. I'm afraid I can no longer fight such a young man."

Bayim accepted the potato with both hands and hesitated for only a moment before replying. "You are the great bear who carries on the legacy of the ferocious tiger Sukhebasu. You lead the Youxiong tribe to stand tall in the southeastern desert. You're strong; even the Hanma tribe dares not cross you. The Heroic Eagle believes in your might. The wolf pup of Libei is much too young. He is far less terrifying than his father, the king of wolves."

“If that is truly the case,” Dalantai said, stroking his beard, “why hasn’t the Heroic Eagle, who hacked off the head of the king wolf himself, slaughtered this whelp yet?”

Dalantai hadn’t lied; he was indeed old. Though his hair was not yet white, his hands had lost the strength to grip a blade for very long. He did not possess Sukhebasu’s sharp will, yet he’d led the Youxiong tribe through blizzards, maintaining their dignity as a powerful tribe of the desert. He was not rash or impulsive like Huhelu; he resembled a wizened sage more than Bayim did.

“This is the reason the Heroic Eagle sent me to talk to you,” Bayim replied. “Our mighty horsemen have yet to break through the defenses of the Libei Armored Cavalry—not because we lack power, but because we lack provisions. The king wolf is dead. Honorable and wise Dalantai, you have also seen the future of the desert. We are about to cross the river into a new land where the tribes will starve no more. This is the wish of the esuhuri, as well as the wish of the Heroic Eagle. We need your help.”

The aroma of the potatoes still buried in the coals wafted past them. Dalantai prodded them with a branch, unmoved by Bayim’s deference. “Many years ago in Gedal, Gegenhas of the Hulu tribe killed my chief, the Ferocious Tiger, with underhanded methods and offered his head to Amur. Amur did not turn it down.” He fished out another potato but didn’t break it open. Instead, he wiped away the dirt on it with the rough pads of his fingers. “Amur is a rapacious vulture. He is not our brother.”

A warrior of the Youxiong tribe sitting nearby stood up, indicating the guest had overstayed his welcome.

Bayim didn’t move. He faced Dalantai and persisted, “Oh honorable Dalantai, that was our foolish mistake. It is in the past. We have a common enemy now—”

“Who was the one who woke this enemy from its slumber?” Dalantai, eyes narrowed to a thin line, studied Bayim. “Amur intends to conquer every inch of land upon which the sun shines. To that end, he didn’t hesitate to use such shameless means to drive us from our homeland. You stupid, low-down cur. You dare call that murder a foolish mistake?”

“I misspoke—Dalantai…”

The bears of the Youxiong tribe surrounded Bayim, blocking out the light, and stared at him like a predator eyeing an antelope.

"If Hassen wants our help, he should beg for our forgiveness," Dalantai said as he peeled the potato's skin. "If Hassen is willing to kill his wife and make the bastards of the Hulu tribe pay the price, we will agree to send our men to Bianjun for his sake."

"Great Bear, don't be like this." Bayim had already been dragged up from the ground. He raised his voice. "Gegenhas is dead! Dorlan is only an innocent girl."

Dalantai looked right at Bayim as he devoured the potato. This time, he didn't offer to share.

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Chapter 244:
Snowy Peaks

TSAGAN KNELT REVERENTLY in the tent, his moon-white hair cascading to the ground as he pleaded, "Honorable Esuhuri, the Youxiong tribe is the craftiest bear in the great desert. We of the Hulu tribe are willing to double the supply of grain you require."

The great hero of the tribes, Amur, stared at the letter in his hands. Hassen bore some resemblance to his father, but even in age, Amur was far more rugged and strong. He set down the letter and lightly brushed the ring he wore on his thumb across his unshaven jaw. He looked like a man who could topple over drunk by the side of the road at any moment.

"They have a saying in the Zhou empire: Act within your capabilities." Amur's voice was low and deep. "I thank you for your sincerity, but my friend, your flocks of sheep have all been sent to the war zone. If this goes on, many from the Hulu tribe will starve this winter."

Tsagan's kowtowing form appeared even more humble as he said, "I'm willing to trade every cow and sheep I have in exchange for a long life for Dorlan."

Amur raised his head slightly. He rubbed his thumb ring along his throat and laughed in spite of himself. "So you heard those rumors, Tsagan."

"My son killed Sukhebasu. If Dalantai wants an eye for an eye, I will offer up my head. The Hulu tribe is willing to pay the price for its contemptible act." Tsagan straightened up. The yellow sand of the desert cast sallow shadows across his aged face. "But he cannot have my daughter."

Dorlan was Tsagan's only daughter and the pearl of the Hulu tribe. The Hulu tribe had no strong, sturdy horses, nor falcons that soared through the skies; what they had was the protection of their god, Chiti. The Hulu tribe lived deep in the desert, where they controlled the most fertile oasis—Lake Chiti. In legends, they were the children who grew up drinking the

milk of Chiti. Dorlan was born with eyes like the green waters of Lake Chiti, and the Hulu tribe regarded her as they regarded the freshest morning dew. She was the most carefree girl in the whole of the desert.

"Since Dorlan married Hassen, she's no longer the precious pearl of Lake Chiti, but the bright pearl of our six tribes." Gripping the armrest of his chair, Amur stood, his broad shoulders catching the sunlight that had leaked into the tent. "If Hassen can't even protect his own wife, then he's unworthy of being Dorlan's husband and does not deserve the allegiance of the Hulu tribe. Tsagan, my good friend, stand up and hold your scimitar tight. Keep your eye on that young man. If he dares to slight your daughter, you may kill him."

Tsagan kowtowed, the deep wrinkles carved into his forehead pressing flat against the ground. "I serve the esuhuri. I firmly believe that the Heroic Eagle, Hassen, will not betray Dorlan, because his father is the most valiant warrior in the entire desert."

Amur walked slowly. When he reached the flap of the tent, he was still rubbing at his throat. He gazed at the yellowing sky awash in sunset glow. His old thumb ring rolled over the jut of his throat, tracing the scar there. It was a mark left by Xiao Fangxu more than a decade ago in the eastern ranges of the Hongyan Mountains.

"The Youxiong tribe has been blinded by the wind of the snowy pass. Dalantai is still reveling in their past glory." Amur looked back. "Without Sukhebasu, their ferocious tiger, the Youxiong tribe has no chance of stopping my Hassen."

Bayim read Hassen's letter quickly. He drank a bowl of milk tea after he was done. Sitting cross-legged before the territory line of the Youxiong tribe, unprotected in the wilderness with a book spread open on his knees, he waited for another audience with Dalantai.

A warrior from the Youxiong tribe shooed him off. "Get lost."

Bayim drew a line in the sand before his knees with a finger. "I'm in the territory of the Qingshu tribe. I have not trespassed."

"You're blocking us from taking a piss," the warrior said.

“Are you going to take a piss like an animal before the eyes of the heavenly gods?” Bayim said, eyes fixed on his book. “If Dalantai is willing to see me once more, this entire part of the desert can be given to you people to use as a latrine.”

Bayim was a venerated sage. He carried a book with him, and to them that meant he was the god’s eye of wisdom traversing the great desert. No one would be so crass as to pull down their pants in front of him to take a piss. Achi and Huhelu hadn’t respected Bayim, and both of them were dead. This had only served to make Bayim more mysterious.

On Bayim’s fifth day at the border, Dalantai agreed to see him again.

Bayim gathered up his book. “Oh honorable—”

“The Libei Armored Cavalry has already reached the Bianjun Commandery. There’s not much time left for Hassen.” Dalantai took off his boots and stepped barefoot onto the yellow earth. “Has he killed his wife?”

Bayim took out Hassen’s letter and made to hand it over, but Dalantai raised a hand to stop him, shaking his head. “I can’t read. You read it.”

“The Heroic Eagle wishes me to tell you,” Bayim said, “He—”

Bayim was midway through when he heard the pounding of hooves from afar. Dalantai stood and turned toward the sound, but before he could open his mouth, they saw a chestnut stallion charge straight into the Youxiong tribe’s territory. It trotted up and stopped right in front of Dalantai.

“I was on the banks of Lake Chiti when I heard the honorable Dalantai wants my head.” Horse shifting restlessly beneath her, Dorlan looked at Dalantai, riding crop in hand. “If you want to use the ghost of Sukhebasu to coerce my husband, you should talk to me first.”

“And so you ride your horse into my territory.” Admiring this legendary flower of Chiti, Dalantai asked, “You’ve decided to trade your head for your husband’s victory?”

Bayim jolted to his feet and saw that the warriors ranged around them had also stood up. He rushed over and raised his arms in front of Dorlan’s horse. To Dalantai, he said, “No, this is not what the Heroic Eagle intends —”

"My elder brother killed your chief." Dorlan wiped dust from her face with the back of her hand. She had been on the road for several days. "Gegenhas was the best brother in the world, but he is not worthy of being called a hero. If you want to avenge Sukhebasu, you can take my head—but that is a feud between the Youxiong tribe and the Hulu tribe, not a feud between you and Hassen. You should speak to me."

Dorlan took a dagger from her belt and flung it to the ground. "I'm willing to use my death to make amends for Gegenhas's rash act. Dalantai, you're a good man. Take this dagger and kill me, and our Hulu tribe will have paid this debt."

Dalantai picked up the small dagger. It was an exquisite piece, inlaid with cat's-eye gems. This weapon had a sharp yet innocent beauty—much like Dorlan.

"You are very brave. If Gegenhas was as courageous as you, the Youxiong tribe and the Hulu tribe could have become brothers years ago."

"There is no point speaking of what-ifs. Take my head and offer it as a sacrifice for the Ferocious Tiger, then pick up your scimitar and pledge allegiance to the Heroic Eagle." Dorlan jumped smoothly down from her horse. The hem of her skirt fluttered in the night wind as she advanced toward Dalantai in a few decisive steps. "The opportunity for the Youxiong tribe is now."

Dalantai spread his hand and cradled Dorlan's dagger as if holding a flower in full bloom. He looked at Dorlan. Strangely enough, he felt almost as if he were looking at his own daughter. The frigid night wind sent the banner of the Youxiong tribe flapping. With the air of a man who had weathered all the vicissitudes of life, he said, resigned, "Silly girl. This debt can never be repaid."

Bayim took the opportunity to say, "The Heroic Eagle promises Dalantai that whether or not the Youxiong tribe is willing to send troops to the Bianjun Commandery, he is willing to return the Youxiong tribe's homeland. He will also give the Youxiong tribe all the cattle and sheep he owns as an apology on behalf of the Hulu tribe. But if Dalantai insists on taking his wife from him, then he will lay down his life and fight the Youxiong tribe to the death."

Dalantai's habitually narrowed eyes widened a little. He had heard similar words very recently.

Just two days ago, Haerigu had sat in his tent and said respectfully, "The prefectural governor of Zhongbo extends his hand to Dalantai. We're willing to take back the Youxiong tribe's homeland for you, and until then, Duanzhou will provide you with an ample supply of grain."

These people all knew the Youxiong tribe wanted to go back home. They wanted above all things to return to their familiar lands and guard the snowy peaks on Sukhebasu's behalf.

Dalantai clasped his hands and said, benevolently, "The Youxiong tribe, in receiving what we are due, is willing to fight for you."

It was the same answer he had given Haerigu.

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Chapter 245:
Relay Station

AT MIDNIGHT, the stars hung high over the vast plains.

Xiao Chiye stood on a sand dune, drinking what remained of his wineskin of On Horseback. The strong liquor seared its way down his throat, and he swallowed slowly, letting the burn linger in his mouth. The wind here blew stronger at night, burying Snowcrest's hooves in the desert sand. Soon enough, he spotted Haerigu returning.

Haerigu dismounted and removed the cloth covering his mouth and nose. Turning aside, he spat out a few mouthfuls of sand and reported, "Dalantai has agreed."

Xiao Chiye was silent, but behind him, Chen Yang asked, "What terms did you offer?"

"We will give him the grasslands to the east of Suotian Pass. That's the Youxiong tribe's homeland. Dalantai wants to go home."

"You gave them a vast expanse of southern grasslands," Xiao Chiye replied flatly.

Haerigu raised his hands, attempting to placate him. "The governor offered the Hanma tribe's territory, which is even richer. I think I've negotiated a better deal."

"The Hanma tribe's territory is near Libei. Moving the Youxiong tribe north makes it easier to control them—that's the outcome Lanzhou wants. But you pushed them back to the eastern side of the snowy peaks." Xiao Chiye sealed the wineskin and tossed it to Chen Yang as he walked away. "We have no eyes there to keep watch on them."

Haerigu hurried to catch up to Xiao Chiye. "The Youxiong tribe treasures old ties. No matter how fertile the Hanma tribe's territory may be, they're unlikely to be enticed. Er-ye, only their old territory can move Dalantai. Besides, the grasslands there are almost eroded by the desert. They still have to move north eventually."

"You're playing tricks." Chen Yang turned to block Haerigu, holding out an arm to prevent him from chasing Xiao Chiye. "You didn't talk to Dalantai about the Qingshu tribe's territory either."

The Qingshu tribe's territory was another of Zhongbo's bargaining chips. Had he followed Shen Zechuan's plan, Haerigu ought to have first offered the Qingshu tribe's land to Dalantai before putting the Hanma tribe's land on the table—but he didn't do that. He knew which outcome would most benefit himself. He had offered the grasslands on the eastern side of the snowy peaks instead of the Hanma tribe's territory so he could keep that fertile land for the Black Scorpions under his own banner.

Xiao Chiye had already mounted his horse, while Chen Yang was still blocking Haerigu. He was in no position to push Chen Yang away; Haerigu merely paced behind the gate of Chen Yang's arm and spread his hands in a shrug. "You go and chat with Dalantai yourself. See if he'll do as you wish."

Chen Yang straightened the blade at his waist, which Haerigu had bumped askew. "He's already doing as *you* wish. If you want the Hanma tribe's land, the governor may very well give it to you, but not if you resort to underhanded means. You've been with His Lordship so long, yet you don't understand your master at all."

Haerigu turned his back to Chen Yang, as if he didn't wish to argue.

Chen Yang took a few steps back and turned to chase after Xiao Chiye's horse.

Face to the yellow plains, Haerigu said in the Biansha tongue, "You certainly make a very earnest lapdog." He looked back and flashed a smile at Chen Yang, as though he hadn't said a thing.

Chen Yang stepped into his stirrup and returned Haerigu's smile. As he wheeled his horse around, he answered in the same tongue, "The look in this envious bastard's eyes is very earnest as well."

Fuck!

Chen Yang spoke with an accent close to the Hanma tribe's, and it gave Haerigu a start. Before he'd arrived, no one in Zhongbo had understood his Biansha dialect.

“There’s nothing outstanding about me, but I’m a pretty quick learner when it comes to the Biansha language. You must have spoken the Liaoying tribe’s dialect in Gedal, but the accent’s a bit harsh.” Chen Yang said politely, “Bark one word more, and I’ll smash your head in.”

Caught off guard, Haerigu obediently nodded and watched as Chen Yang rode away, the vanishing hoofbeats kicking dust into his face.

Xiao Chiye returned to the Bianjun Commandery but didn’t find Qi Zhuyin in her tent. He circled around the camp until he found the marshal in another.

Qi Zhuyin had just woken up. Hearing movement outside, she leaned out to whistle at Xiao Chiye.

Xiao Chiye, Wolfsfang in hand, wasn’t sure whether to enter or make himself scarce.

The rouge on Qi Zhuyin’s lips was partially applied, the pinkies of both hands stained red. However, she wasn’t applying the makeup herself; she had handed the job to Hua Xiangyi. Hua Xiangyi reached up and carefully spread the rouge evenly across the marshal’s lips.

“This is such a pretty color.” Hua Xiangyi’s voice was soft and melodious. “It suits the marshal so well, and it’s not conspicuous at night.” She applied the finishing touch and turned to Xiao Chiye with a smile. “Doesn’t it look good?”

Xiao Chiye folded his arms and considered her at length. After a rare hesitation, he answered, “Not bad.”

It wasn’t that Qi Zhuyin never wore makeup. When she was in her daily wear at home or attending a banquet in her court attire, she wore a touch. But no matter how superb Xiao Chiye’s eyesight, he could detect no difference between this rouge and the one the marshal usually applied.

“You don’t understand.” Hua Xiangyi’s slender, delicate fingers brushed open the handkerchief on her lap to reveal a small, ornate mirror inlaid with pearls. She held it up for Qi Zhuyin to take a look.

Qi Zhuyin wiped her hands on the handkerchief as she examined her reflection. Only her lips and chin were visible in the circle of the mirror.

She laughed. “It’s pretty.”

Xiao Chiye waited a moment longer for Qi Zhuyin to step out. She let the tent flap down behind her.

“The mistress is here to work on the accounts for me,” Qi Zhuyin explained.

Xiao Chiye coughed into the expansive night and managed, “Oh.”

He glanced at Qi Zhuyin out of the corner of his eye. The marshal was young, but not that young. For a woman at least, she had long passed the suitable age for marriage. Xiao Jiming and Lu Guangbai were friendly with her, but they never asked her about marriage, for everyone knew Qi Zhuyin could never get married.

“The third lady’s mental arithmetic is outstanding,” he commented. “I remember hearing about it even back in Qudu. Your house’s accounts are complicated and tedious. With her help, it will be a lot easier.”

A powdery fragrance lingered on Qi Zhuyin as she turned to look at him. “The empress dowager has fallen. The third lady’s status in Qidong is not like before. Once Xue Yanqing is done investigating Chuancheng, it will be Dicheng’s turn. The Hua clan stands on the brink of ruin. I’m worried my father’s concubines at home will stir up trouble if I don’t keep her by my side.” She didn’t elaborate further, but instead teased, “And besides, I’m so fond of girls.”

The two of them had made their way up to the city wall. At the top, Xiao Chiye stood looking out.

“Your Scorpion is back,” Qi Zhuyin remarked.

Xiao Chiye pointed toward the southeast. “The Youxiong tribe is willing to move out of your way. They want to return to the grasslands east of Suotian Pass, where they came from.”

The firelight illuminated Qi Zhuyin’s upturned face. Hua Xiangyi was right. This rouge was inconspicuous, and it resembled Qi Zhuyin’s natural lip color when tinted by the color of the night. She crossed her arms with a pensive expression. “Dalantai is a fool.”

After all, only a fool would give up the Qingshu tribe’s fertile territory and return to grasslands that had already been half engulfed by the

yellow sands.

"He's not," Xiao Chiye said. "He'll make way for you so you have a straight shot to Gedal. Then, once you get there, he'll be the hand that chokes off your retreat. When the time comes, he can demand anything he pleases."

"Then Dalantai is still a fool, because both you and I can see through such an obvious tactic." Qi Zhuyin drummed her fingertips against her arm and looked out into the depths of the night. "You've been hanging out with Lu Guangbai too long and learned all his infantryman's earthiness. When you stand on the ground, you want to dig deep into the earth; you itch to commit to heart the terrain stretching for miles around. But you've overlooked the tribe itself."

Qi Zhuyin walked around Xiao Chiye. Bracing her hands on the battlement, she nimbly vaulted onto it, then stepped into a crenel and bent to inspect the mechanical crossbow at the top of the wall.

"If Dalantai claims he will make way for me, my guess is that he won't come back and cut me off. The Youxiong tribe doesn't have that many warriors. Dalantai must concentrate his military force; otherwise, he'll be left defenseless."

Xiao Chiye considered for a moment. "You're saying Dalantai is concentrating his forces for a different attack?"

"When I leave the Bianjun Commandery, half its forty thousand garrison troops will go with me. Without Lu Guangbai here, there'll be no commanding general to engage them. If they don't attack now, what are they waiting for?"

"Even so, Jiejie, it's not worth it. Dalantai doesn't have enough men. Even if he takes the Bianjun Commandery, he can't hold it. You'll be back soon enough, and he'll have the Cangjun Commandery Garrison Troops at his rear. There's no way he can hang on to Bianjun. But if he goes through all that trouble, it won't be just for the sake of food, like Hassen."

Qi Zhuyin straightened. As she turned to look at him, the wind tousled her hair. She didn't spin out the scenario like Lu Guangbai would have; she only said, "Then we'll just have to give it a try."

As soon as Xiao Chiye left the front lines, Libei started to show signs of exhaustion. Still, Hassen's onslaught never abated. It was all Lu Guangbai could do to hold down the fort. He ordered Mount Luo to strengthen its defenses, but even the sharpest eyes in Duanzhou couldn't see all the way to the banks of the Chashi River. It was then that Huo Lingyun quietly left the prefecture.

The squadron he led was small in number and wholly made up of the new Embroidered Uniform Guard. They were taciturn men of few words who traveled light on the ponies they had captured from Achi. They rode north along the Chashi River, resting at sunrise and traveling after sunset.

The wind was dry tonight. Huo Lingyun had finished the last drop of water in his waterskin. Wiping his mouth, he straightened in the saddle and looked at the terrain ahead.

If only that annoying son of a bitch, Fei Sheng, were here.

Huo Lingyun hung the waterskin back on his saddle. He lacked Fei Sheng's keen senses and was slow to react in the darkness. Yet he had no choice but to move at night.

"Where are we headed?" A guard removed his wind collar and poured water down his throat. "We've been riding north for five days."

"We're not headed anywhere," Huo Lingyun said, "until we can walk around with our eyes closed."

Once they came within the vicinity of Third Sand Camp, they would turn back. But instead of returning to Duanzhou, they would head south along the river, then north again along the same route, back and forth. The guards kept silent. Before setting off, Qiao Tianya had given them another harsh dressing-down. No one refuted Huo Lingyun during the journey.

The ponies had great stamina and endurance. Even after walking in the desert for several days, they never grew tired. With their thick necks, they looked slow, but the Embroidered Uniform Guard had already gotten used to their speed that far outstripped what one would expect from their appearance. They were all splendid mounts.

Huo Lingyun stopped along the riverbank just before dawn. He let the ponies quench their thirst while he squatted nearby to wash his face.

The water of the river this early in the morning was icy cold, and just a splash to the face proved invigorating.

Huo Lingyun opened his waterskin and pressed it into the river. Through the bubbles gurgling up, he spotted a surge of crimson. His fingers came into contact with something cold yet yielding under the water. Black hair floated up to join the crimson.

"A corpse!" A guard washing his face beside him cried in a low voice. He yanked the body out of the water by the hair.

Huo Lingyun turned over the corpse to see a face bloated by the water. He wiped off the muddy silt and tried to identify the body.

"His armor's been stripped off," the guard said immediately. "He died upstream."

Huo Lingyun tore at the clothing on the body, then jolted to his feet. "This is an armored cavalryman."

An armored cavalryman raced along the trail connecting Mount Luo to Third Sand Camp. He jolted with every bump on the road, leaving a long trail of blood where his horse's hooves passed. His helmet concealed his face from view, but he was just an unknown soldier. His lips moved, but his words were almost soundless. "The…"

The horse charged into the relay station fifty li south of Third Sand Camp, where he tumbled out of the saddle and collapsed on the ground.

"The stables at Mount Luo…"

He had hung on that long, but he breathed his last before he could finish his message. As long as he reached the relay station, he had succeeded. The armored cavalry here would immediately convey the news to Third Sand Camp, and reinforcements would ride south.

But the relay station was deathly still. Dead bodies were strewn everywhere; even the falcons lay in bloody heaps at the bottoms of their cages. There were no survivors here.

The air shimmered with waves of heat. Not even the cry of a bird broke the silence.

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Chapter 246:
A Missive in the Night

HUO LINGYUN SCRAMBLED onto his horse. Tugging on the reins, he shouted, "To the Luo-Sand Relay Station!"

The stables on Mount Luo were too far away; not even their swift ponies could make it there in time. Huo Lingyun's only hope was to head for the closer Luo-Sand Relay Station near Third Sand Camp; it was a supply station established to pass messages between Mount Luo and Libei.

The ponies' breathing grew heavier with every hour. The weather was too hot; even the strong and healthy Embroidered Uniform Guard had to keep pouring water over themselves to avoid getting heatstroke. Huo Lingyun led them away from the bank of the Chashi River and rode northwest for four hours without rest. By the time the relay station was within sight, it was dark.

"Bodies." A guard near the back raised a finger to scratch his nose and said, "The place is full of bodies."

An armored cavalryman sprawled face-down before the wide-open gates of the relay station. He had clearly been dead several hours, and his blood had soaked the ground black. The body trapped inside the heavy armor would begin to stink before long.

The guard dismounted. He crouched down to examine the armored cavalryman's corpse. After a moment, he said to Huo Lingyun, "This man was a valiant warrior."

Huo Lingyun looked at the two arrows sprouting from the cavalryman's back and nodded. Despite bearing such grievous wounds, this man had evidently galloped all the way to the relay station to warn them before succumbing to death.

The guard stood and covered his mouth and nose. With his other hand, he held the torch higher. "This place—"

He fell silent again.

Corpses were strewn throughout the relay station. The stationmaster had been strung up on the flagpole, like tattered rags hung out to dry in the quiet night. Huo Lingyun took the torch and moved in for a closer look at his misshapen figure, only to realize the man's head had been cut off.

"The horses have all been hacked to death," another guard said from the stable. "Even if someone survived, he couldn't have made it to Mount Luo or Third Sand Camp before daybreak. And the falcons are all dead."

The door to the falcon cage was still ajar. All the falcons, unable to break free of their ankle chains, had gotten their necks snapped. There were no survivors in the Luo-Sand Relay Station. Even the stray dogs the soldiers were feeding had been slaughtered.

The Biansha Horsemen had come. Holding the torch aloft, Huo Lingyun sank into thought.

Since their construction, Mount Luo's stables had become a fledgling information hub between Libei and Zhongbo. For that reason, Shen Zechuan built them to be extraordinarily sturdy. Eight hundred men were stationed at the Luo-Sand Relay Station—not only the Libei Armored Cavalry, but also Zhongbo garrison troops. It was equivalent to a small-scale military encampment. Emergency relay points had been set along the roads in all four directions, and the watchtowers had a view of three sides. Lu Guangbai had recently asked the soldiers along Luo-Sand trail to increase their vigilance. No one had been negligent here.

"The Biansha Horsemen excel at surprise attacks," the guard said. "Back when they attacked Border Camp—"

"Border Camp." Huo Lingyun whipped around. "Border Camp—Border Camp!"

In the sixth month of last year, when the Biansha Horsemen had mounted a surprise attack on Border Camp, they had snuck up on the camp from the south using a path through Mount Luo. Shen Zechuan and Xiao Chiye later blocked the trail, but the entrance near the Chashi River, to the east, could not be choked off.

"The Biansha Horsemen came here during the reign of Xiande—they know the terrain like the backs of their hands. This relay station is right on

the path the Biansha Horsemen once used to get to Mount Luo." Huo Lingyun bounded up the stairs in a few strides and pushed open the door.

"For them to evade our eyes on the riverbank and launch a sneak attack here, their numbers must have been small." The guards with him helped him lower the stationmaster from the flagpole as he spoke. "It's very likely the infiltrators are Scorpions."

Whether it was Scorpions or not, Hassen had slaughtered this relay station to prevent news of his attack on Mount Luo from making its way to Libei. He was trying to delay reinforcements. But this group of infiltrating horsemen hadn't stopped here. Huo Lingyun gazed down the road southward. If he was right, Hassen planned to send them to sever the connection between Dunzhou and Duanzhou, leaving Duanzhou helpless and alone.

"This place is closer to Third Sand Camp." Huo Lingyun turned and descended the stairs, then whistled for his horse. "We'll continue northward. If we set out now, we can reach Third Sand Camp by dawn and ask Libei for help."

Huo Lingyun couldn't make it to Dunzhou before the horsemen. He had only one good option, and that was to implore the armored cavalry at Third Sand Camp to head south immediately to assist Duanzhou. Thanks to Hassen's attack, they'd lost all lines of communication with the two cities of Dunzhou and Duanzhou. Duanzhou would be the first to bear the brunt of the enemy forces. If anything prevented Third Sand Camp from coming to their aid, the city would face complete annihilation.

Huo Lingyun cracked his horsewhip.

Every second was critical.

The Embroidered Uniform Guard rode hard through the night, breaking the silence along the trail and moving swiftly between the shadows of the trees. Huo Lingyun's breathing was labored. He had been on horseback for hours without rest, and his inner thighs were burning. Their saddles and their faces were damp with sweat. They were strings stretched to the limit, having been on the move for days on end.

Faster!

Clenching his horsewhip, Huo Lingyun raised his arm amid the jolts and bumps. But before he could lash the pony faster, the mount under him screamed as its knees buckled.

Huo Lingyun covered his head with his arms and rolled to the ground. Specters flashed among the trees on both sides of the trail. He leapt to his feet and drew his blade just as those rapid footsteps broke through the bushes to lunge at him.

"Trip ropes!" A guard close behind him reined his horse to a halt and shouted, "Ambush!"

Huo Lingyun brought up his blade to parry the incoming blow, to no avail. The attacker slammed bodily into him, knocking him off his feet and sending him tumbling to the base of a tree. Wind whistled at his back. Huo Lingyun grasped a tree root and pushed himself up, pulling his legs in to dodge the next swipe of the blade.

Scorpions—no—

Huo Lingyun hissed through clenched teeth, "Horsemen!"

These were the elites of the Hanma tribe.

Their attackers moved swiftly to outflank them, closing in like a tightly woven net. Their footfalls were abnormally uniform, like snakes writhing toward them in unison. Even the tracks they left behind while passing over the sandy ground were chillingly identical.

The scimitars on the left slashed low, aiming for the knees of the Embroidered Uniform Guard's ponies. At the last second, scimitars clanged against Xiuchun sheaths. The guards kicked out at the horsemen's chests, then spun away, drawing their blades as they landed. The instant their feet touched the ground, their sabers flashed out like bursts of daylight and slit the Biansha Horsemen's throats. Then they leapt back atop their horses, completing the entire attack in one smooth sequence.

Foiled, the Hanma elites took half a step back. One brought a hand to his throat. "The Embroidered Uniform Guard!"

A guard flipped his blade in his hand and wiped the blood on the back of his belt. "Embroidered Uniform Guard? Your daddies are called the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry now!"

After its shock, Huo Lingyun's pony couldn't manage to get back on its feet. He dashed a few steps, grabbed the outstretched arm of one of the guards, and leapt onto the back of the man's pony.

"Libei has their hands full right now." The guard tugged at the reins, doing his best to maneuver as the horsemen pressed in. "With Biansha's ambush here, even if we make it to Third Sand Camp, it'll be too late!"

"Back—" Huo Lingyun gripped his hilt with both hands and swung his blade in a wide arc to deflect a scimitar slashing toward them. "Back to Duanzhou!"

Proceeding to Libei was impossible now. "Turn around." Huo Lingyun swiped sweat off his face. "They've got us surrounded. We need to break out and head south."

Hassen was too cautious. He had slaughtered every man in the Luo-Sand Relay Station, not even sparing the horses and falcons, yet he had still left this elite force on the trail north to stop any survivors from slipping through. But the number of elites Hassen left here was small—this gave Huo Lingyun an opportunity.

"Fuck." One of the guards shook blood off his blade, scattering red droplets. "This blade was imperial issue, and now look at it—it's all jagged!"

The pony danced in place, and the guard yanked hard on the reins to turn its head. A wave of horsemen lunged toward them from the left. The saddle slipped right, and the horse toppled, pulled down by the weight of two riders. Huo Lingyun smashed his elbow into a horseman's face.

More horsemen swarmed toward them like locusts. The guard held back the scimitars with his saber until he was thrown backward by the force of the blows.

Scimitars came swinging down as he fell to the ground. He bellowed and held his Xiuchun saber overhead, his free hand braced against the blade. Steel screeched against steel as he pushed upward inch by inch, the veins on the back of his hands bulging.

"Can't…hold them…" The guard was shouldering the force of several men, flat on the ground and barely able to lift his head from the

strain. Drenched in sweat, he felt the veins on his temples throbbing as he panted through gritted teeth, “Hey, pal… Help me…”

But Huo Lingyun was already galloping away on the man’s pony.

The guard nearly deflated. “Motherfucker…”

Huo Lingyun didn’t look back as he charged through the Biansha Horsemen’s lines. He tasted salt in his mouth—not sweat this time, but blood from having bitten through his lip. After galloping a few lengths, he wheeled the pony around and slammed his blade home in its sheath. He then rode straight back the way he’d come, his pony’s hooves trampling the overlapping shadows of the combatants.

The guard on the ground couldn’t hold back the scimitars any longer; the Biansha Horsemen’s faces were nearly pressed to his. Just as his arms were about to give out, the pungent smell of gunpowder floated across the breeze. A deafening explosion accompanied the hot splatter of blood over his face.

Huo Lingyun leaned down to grab his hand and hauled him up behind him in the saddle.

“Break through!” Huo Lingyun’s spirits were high as he galloped ahead with his smoking musket, leading the charge south toward the opening he’d made. “Break through!”

Yin Chang threw his head back and poured the last of the wine in the tankard down his throat. He shook the tankard, then belched several times for good measure. Leaning over the battlement, he yelled down to the soldiers guarding the gate, “Got any more? This wine is delicious!”

One of the soldiers shifted a few steps to get a clear look at Yin Chang’s face in the glow of the torches and moonlight. “No can do. You shouldn’t drink so much, sir. We’re still on duty!”

“That’s why I’m drinkin’.” Yin Chang’s legs felt a little weak. He swayed drunkenly to his feet and strained to look up at the torches on the battlements. “Hey, what happened to the rest of the bows and arrows here? Replace them, quick!”

Fei Sheng had yet to reach the city wall, and already he could hear Yin Chang making a hullabaloo. He tucked the newly purchased wine along the wall, kicked it under a mechanical crossbow, and pulled a tarp over it. Then he marched menacingly up the wall and grabbed Yin Chang by the back of his collar. "Sure. Someone will do it right away. You go to bed!"

Yin Chang's heels slid across the ground as Fei Sheng dragged him off. Rubbing his reddened nose, he grumbled, "Why isn't General Lu here yet? I've waited so many days just to see him again. I've drunk so many rounds of wine in the meantime!"

The last time Yin Chang went to the front lines with Xiao Chiye, he had been ecstatic to meet Lu Guangbai. He had hauled the general off to drink with him and hadn't stopped until Lu Guangbai threw up thrice in one night and passed out cold in his tent the next day. Without another word, Zuo Qianqiu had dispatched someone to pluck Yin Chang out of the camp and deliver him back to Duanzhou.

Fei Sheng, whose sensitive nose rebelled at the stench of a drunkard, fanned the air with one hand before pinching his nose. "Not another word from you. You've embarrassed us enough."

Displeased, Yin Chang flapped his arms and squinted up at Fei Sheng. Stubbornly, he said, "Me drinking is an embarrassment to you? Like you have a leg to stand on. I don't complain about *you* being an embarrassment."

Fei Sheng ferried him down the wall to turn in his authority token in the duty room. Patrols were strict these days, and he had to spend time signing in properly.

Yin Chang took the opportunity to hunt for wine, using his deadened nose to sniff around. "Where'd you hide it? Here…?"

He lifted the corner of his robe and knelt on the ground. Butt stuck up in the air, he bent lower to look under the mounted crossbow.

Fei Sheng, it seemed, was still a little too green.

Craning his neck, Yin Chang stretched a hand in to reach for the wine, muttering, "My precious! Aye, why are you so far away…"

Fei Sheng looked back and set down the brush, ready to berate the old man—but at that moment, he heard a soft click. His ears were so sensitive he could even hear the sound of the wind. He cocked his head and listened again, holding his breath.

The banners outside hung limp on their poles. The breeze at the city gate had died.

Yin Chang reached the wine at last, but instead of fishing it out, he maintained his posture on the ground, sniffing the scent of the land. Before even Fei Sheng could react, Yin Chang bellowed, *"Enemy attack—!"*

Heavy rocks from catapults crashed into the top of the wall, sending stone flying and raining dust all over. As Fei Sheng covered his head to dodge the debris, he heard the alarm clanging from the watchtower. A garrison soldier pounded the gong with his drumsticks, roaring, *"Enemy attack, enemy attack!* Get your ass out of bed*!"*

Fei Sheng pushed through the milling soldiers and rushed up to the top of the wall. When he got a clear look at the plain outside of Duanzhou, he sucked in a chilly breath.

Yin Chang clambered to his feet. He tapped a passing garrison soldier with his scabbard and commanded sharply, "Light the beacons and report to the governor, now!"

He climbed up to the battlements and grabbed Fei Sheng. "Take your token with you—lead the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry to protect the governor and his advisors. Tell them to be ready to flee." Yin Chang's beet-red nose twitched a couple of times. Without even looking over the walls, he pointed to the smoke beacon tower nearby. "Xiao-Sheng, if the smoke signal here starts burning, escort His Lordship westward to Dunzhou!"

Shen Zechuan had yet to retire for the night. He was still sitting in the soft halo of lamplight, pinching the center of his brow with two fingers as he listened to Kong Ling talk about the river dams, when chaos broke out in the courtyard. Qiao Tianya lifted the bamboo blinds and strode in with Ding Tao and Li Xiong right behind him.

Kong Ling rose to his feet. "What—"

“Master.” Qiao Tianya strapped his saber to his belt. “It’s a surprise attack from the horsemen.”

The advisors in the hall all scrambled to their feet, exclaiming in surprise. Yao Wenyu immediately looked at Shen Zechuan. “The reinforcements from Libei aren’t here yet.”

Shen Zechuan removed his hand from his brow and stared into the candle flame. After a moment, he said, “We received no warning. Either the front line in the north has collapsed, or Mount Luo is lost.”

Everyone in the room was a scholar. Those like Gao Zhongxiong, who had never lived through a war, were ghastly pale. Everyone looked to Shen Zechuan—the prefectural governor was their steadying pillar.

At a moment like this, Shen Zechuan couldn’t show fear. He straightened the lid of his teacup and pushed to his feet. Ding Tao shook open his cloak and made to drape it over Shen Zechuan, but Shen Zechuan held up a hand to stop him.

The governor said, “Give me Avalanche.”

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Chapter 247:
Sovereign

"WHERE ARE THE mounted scouts?!"

"Dead." A member of the garrison troops who had been startled awake by the alarm kept pace behind Yin Chang. "All the scouts on the perimeter were wiped out. No one returned."

Yin Chang filled his wineskin to the top and hung it back at his waist. As he slid his blade in beside it, he spat, "Hassen, that son of a bitch."

There was no word from the relay stations; all the scouts were dead. They were unable to receive any news or get any out; no reinforcements would be coming.

"Reorganize the scouting squadrons," Yin Chang said. "Wait for an opportunity to break through the enemy lines. We must light the beacon towers before daybreak to get the news to Libei, Dunzhou, and Bianjun."

Duanzhou had already been massacred once because its scouts could not outrun the Biansha horses. This was why, when Shen Zechuan had established the four-way roads through Duanzhou, he had also built the beacon towers, in imitation of the Bianjun Commandery's thousands of li of beacon towers. If they could light the beacons, the north, west, and south would know Duanzhou was in danger.

Yin Chang had only just lifted the tent flap when he heard a steady drumbeat outside the walls.

The Biansha Horsemen were beating their battle drums.

Yin Chang broke into a run, bounding up the steps to the top of the city wall. *"Ready—"*

The archers on the battlements drew their bowstrings as one, holding their breath as they focused their gazes outside the city.

Small cylindrical drums were affixed on either side of the Biansha Horsemen's saddles. Their beats reverberated through the night, the first

sign of the impending assault. As the drumbeats reached a feverish pitch, the ponies snorted hot puffs of air and charged.

Yin Chang flung his arm down. *"Release!"*

In a flash, the charging Biansha Horsemen split into two flanks, revealing shield-bearing infantry behind them. The infantry raised their shields, moving swiftly against the rain of arrows, and pressed in toward the city gate.

Duanzhou sat facing the east, with open terrain stretching from its main gate all the way to the banks of the Chashi River. Shen Zechuan had already begun digging trenches here, intending to construct a moat around the city. But they had been pressed for time this year; only the trench along the east-facing main gate had begun to take shape, and water from the river had yet to be diverted into it. Xiao Chiye had cautioned Shen Zechuan prior to his departure south, so Shen Zechuan had removed the square bricks at the bottom of the ditch and replaced them with caltrops used by Libei's troops.

The city gates swung open. Yin Chang charged out through the gateway tunnel, leading the Duanzhou Garrison Troops to remove the planks across the trench before the Biansha Horsemen stormed them. Without the planks, the Biansha Horsemen would have to go through the trench to advance to the city gate.

As soon as the rain of arrows from the city walls stopped, the soldier atop the wall lit the oil drums.

Dragging the planks with him in retreat, Yin Chang called out, "Throw the drums!"

The oil drums on the battlements were smashed in unison, and flames along the wall flared to life. The troops leaned out over the battlements and threw the drums down with all their might. Burning oil splashed over the infantry's shields until gouts of flame ran together into a fiery pool. But before Yin Chang could rejoice, the infantry scattered to make way for a covered cart hidden behind them.

Shit!

This kind of siege wagon had originally been designed as cover for digging ditches. It had a shield in front and an assault wagon at the back,

while the covered cart in the middle could protect the diggers from arrows. In addition, it had one more noteworthy function—to extinguish fires. The infantry hidden inside the cart lifted the covers and emerged. Their daggers flashed out as they slashed through the cowhide sacks tied to the cart, full of water from the river. In no time, they had contained the fire started by the oil drums.

Yin Chang now had a clear grasp of their enemy's strategy. Hassen had used the infantry to deplete their arrows and oil drums as he pushed his infantry right up to the trench. This was all to set the stage for his riders, poised for action at the back. He called up to the wall, "Archers, ready—"

The words had scarcely left Yin Chang's mouth when the infantry ahead of them raised their shields once again. But Yin Chang had no intention of loosing the arrows. Instead, he drew his blade and led the garrison troops behind him in a mad charge forward, leaping into the air like an old lion under the astonished gaze of the Biansha Horsemen.

"Block the trench!"

Yin Chang landed heavily on the trench's brick wall and immediately slid down the steep side. Clinging to the top, he scrambled to get his footing and climb his way up. The garrison troops followed him, hacking their way into the Biansha infantry.

"Release the arrows!"

The rain of arrows came whistling down. With their hands full fighting off the enemy blades, the Biansha troops couldn't raise their shields in time. They finally dropped.

"Who's that?" a sturdy man on a pony asked in the Biansha tongue, craning his neck to follow Yin Chang's white hair through the melee. He ran a hand over his scimitar, the lizard tattoo on his bare arm rippling, and said with considerable interest, "He's like a hero."

"The mighty Joril hasn't yet met him," a horseman beside him said. "He's the commander of the Cizhou Garrison Troops, the old general who captured Fanzhou for Shen Zechuan. His name is Yin Chang."

Imitating the Zhou empire's intonation, Joril repeated, "Yi—Yi Chong?"

"It means *prosperity*." The horseman soothed his restless horse.

Joril sized up Yin Chang a moment more. "He has the courage of a lion." He pressed his legs to his horse's flanks and nudged it forward, swaying in his saddle. "I want to fight him."

The horseman turned back to look at the eagle banner behind them and advised, "We haven't received Hassen's orders. Now's not the time to launch an attack."

Joril rolled his muscular shoulders and drew his scimitar. "Hassen wants us to fight a quick battle. I can't wait any longer."

Inside the city, the garrison troops assembled the commoners near the west gate, which opened on the road leading to Dunzhou. If the main gate in the east was breached, at least this way the commoners would still have the opportunity to flee rather than be massacred inside the city. The citizens rushed past one after another, hurriedly dragging their families with them. Occasionally, the wails of infants could be heard, although they were quickly stifled. The number of people gathering grew, and repressed gasps all over followed in the wake of the bombardment from the east gate.

The advisors had long been waiting there. They carried with them simple luggage containing documents and records—these were the fruit of their lives' painstaking labor. Gao Zhongxiong's ghastly pale complexion had yet to regain its color. He clutched his cloth bundle tightly and squeezed into the crowd of people.

Kong Ling carefully pushed Yao Wenyu's chair, a bag strapped to his chest contained a fidgeting Hunu.

As Yao Wenyu's wheelchair passed the commoners, he heard someone in the crowd sobbing. He turned to look keenly.

"M-Mister." A lone widow holding her child covered her mouth and nose as she sobbed. She asked quietly, "Is–is there going to be another massacre…"

The young gentleman's gaze was kind as he offered the woman his own handkerchief. "No, there won't be."

Sobs rose all around. His words were unconvincing under the sound of killing outside the gates.

"If the city is breached, no chance we can outrun horses. We're still gonna die. Everybody's gonna die." A man squatting in the corner pulled at the halter of his one remaining donkey and said in his thick rural accent, "I shouldn'ta come to Duanzhou!"

"Where are the garrison troops?" Another man stomped up to the gate and slapped a palm against it. "Open the gate now and let us flee to Dunzhou! Every person who runs before the walls are breached is a life saved!"

An uproar broke out as the crowd jostled toward the west gate. Panic pervaded the night air. Gao Zhongxiong lurched forward under the force of the crowd's shoving. Hugging his bundle close, he turned sideways and elbowed his way toward Kong Ling.

"Please, don't push." Gao Zhongxiong protected his bundle and craned his neck above the crowd to call out, "Everyone, please don't…"

The jostling crowd couldn't hear him at all. Someone's elbow sank into Gao Zhongxiong's stomach, and he lost his grip on his bundle. Paper and brushes scattered over the ground. He dove down to pick them up, but there were too many people; before he could reach them, the brushes broke under trampling feet.

"Don't step on my brushes! Don't step on my brushes!" Gao Zhongxiong cried anxiously.

Even Kong Ling could barely remain on his feet. Yao Wenyu couldn't get around easily; it would be disastrous if his wheelchair were to get swept away into the crowd. Keeping one hand on Hunu and tugging at the wheelchair with the other, Kong Ling called, "Where are the guards? Hurry and protect Yuanzhuo!"

With a loud *clang*, the wheels of Yao Wenyu's wheelchair struck something heavy and nearly tipped over. Yao Wenyu turned and looked at the crowd. Moonlight, in its untimely serenity, cascaded along his sleeves and slid to the ground.

More hands slapped the gate, and calls of "Open up!" rose up everywhere. The memory of the massacre in Duanzhou was too deeply

ingrained. These people couldn't see the light through the darkness. The more brutal the sound of the fighting at the front gates, the more their courage faltered.

"Oh, blast it!" Gao Zhongxiong flung his sleeves in anger. Abandoning his brushes, he grabbed Yao Wenyu's wheelchair and bulled it through the crowd. Elbowing aside the waves of people, he cursed. "Stop jostling, dammit! You're going to hurt someone! What's the hurry? The city hasn't been breached. The governor is here with us!"

Shouts promptly rang out. "Where is the governor?!"

"Where did Shen Zechuan go?!"

"No soldiers! No guards! Did he run?!"

Gao Zhongxiong never expected his words of encouragement to be twisted like this. He hurriedly said, "His Lordship is—"

"Shen Zechuan fled!" A woman stomped her feet and fumed, "I don't see him anywhere!"

The atmosphere seemed to have ignited. Previously muttered curses erupted among the crowd as everyone's tempers ran hotter. Gradually, the slapping on the gate turned into pounding fists. Terror choked the air. The people were hysterical with fear.

The long, inevitable fuse named Shen Wei had finally detonated. That name had been like a sharp sword hanging over Shen Zechuan's head at every hour, a manifestation of Zhongbo's reluctance to accept Shen Zechuan. These doubts had never been fully eradicated, even when Shen Zechuan held all six prefectures. Shen Wei had abandoned the city and fled, leaving behind a bloodbath in Duanzhou and Dunzhou. Now, in this desperate hour, his son was nowhere to be seen. Once again, the Shen clan cowered in the face of danger.

"Open the gate—open the gate!" a man bawled.

The gate buckled slightly, opening a crack from the force of all those crowding against it. One of the remaining garrison soldiers, unable to stop the crowd, raised his voice and chided across the rioting, "Stop pushing!"

But it was no use. The crowd had already tipped into chaos.

The garrison soldier gasped for breath against the press of people, but he didn't dare open the gate. All the scouts outside Duanzhou were dead. No one knew if the Biansha Horsemen had already circled around to the west gate. If he opened the gate now, it was as good as stabbing Duanzhou in the back. Then the city really would fall.

The garrison soldier shoved the people back, making space for himself to breathe. Drawing the blade at his hip, he bellowed, "Who dares push again?!"

Kong Ling's response was instant. "Oh no."

Sure enough, the moment the garrison soldier flashed his steel, pandemonium broke out. Cloth bundles and fists rained down on him. The tide of people surged forward chanting, *"Open the gate!"*

The soldier couldn't cut down the city's own people. Protecting his head as he retreated, he felt someone seize his blade. He blurted, "Grab my blade and I'll cut your hand off!"

The city gate shook from the banging of dozens of fists. Before the soldier could find his footing, he heard a muffled *boom* at his back. The entire city gate shuddered as a battering ram smashed into it from outside.

The soldier was thrown to the ground from the impact. "Fuck me!" He swatted away the boots trampling him and crawled to his feet, kicking commoners out of his way. Frantically pushing them back, he shouted to his men, "Quick, block the gate!"

"The horsemen!" The crowd shrieked in fear. Everyone scrambled away from the gate. "The Biansha Horsemen have breached the city!"

Dragging his blade with him, the soldier pressed his back against the gate that was on the verge of splintering. More and more soldiers rushed up, shouting in unison as they attempted to push the faltering gate back into place. The huge battering ram outside struck the gate once more, the impact rattling their teeth and knocking their backs numb.

Yao Wenyu gripped the armrests of his wheelchair. Gao Zhong-xiong and Kong Ling stood on either side of him, ready to wheel Yuanzhuo away. The hair on the back of Kong Ling's neck rose—through the cracks in the city gate, he heard the thunder of hooves.

"I'll take Yuanzhuo through the alley," he declared. Kong Ling had no mind to spare for his documents as he picked up the hem of his robe and pushed Yao Wenyu forward. "Hurry, Shenwei, run!"

Gao Zhongxiong's hands were shaking. "I-I'll stay with y—"

The city gate shattered, wood splinters flying in all directions. The garrison troops could no longer hold back the enemy. The Biansha Horsemen galloped right over them, swinging their scimitars at Gao Zhongxiong and the others.

The soldier at the gate lunged forward and parried the scimitar with his own blade. Back to the citizens, he blocked the way of the horsemen. "Go! Hurry and report to His Lordship! The west gate is breached. Our garrison—"

His head tumbled to the ground.

Gao Zhongxiong screamed. His knees buckled, and he clutched Yao Wenyu's wheelchair for support as he sank toward the ground. Yao Wenyu watched the scimitars slash toward them. His back was soaked in sweat. In a flash, he turned the wheelchair around and made himself a barrier before Kong Ling and Gao Zhongxiong.

A column of light cavalry burst through the crowd, shooting through the night as swiftly as a bright stream of mercury. A longsword, flying through the air, pierced the throat of a Biansha Horseman. The freshly arrived cavalry reached them before the man's body toppled from the saddle.

Qiao Tianya wrested his sword from the man's throat and returned it to its sheath. He looked down at Yao Wenyu gasping for breath and shouted to Ding Tao behind him, "Take the gentlemen away!"

Yao Wenyu didn't move. He gripped the armrests of his wheelchair. As he turned his head, his eyes skimmed over Qiao Tianya and caught on Frostfall whinnying as it reared. Shen Zechuan's white sleeves fluttered in the wind atop the horse's back. Avalanche was like an enraged dragon, slicing with swift efficiency through the Biansha Horsemen's throats. The blade was a flash of lightning in his hand, so quick one could barely get a clear look at it.

Frostfall leapt over the crowd's heads and galloped through the battered city gate. The Embroidered Uniform Cavalry behind him swept toward the Biansha Horsemen, the impact of their blades upon the scimitars sending up a spray of sparks in the frigid wind.

Before Qiao Tianya could turn to join them, Yao Wenyu speared him with a look, veins bulging faintly on the backs of his hands where he grasped his chair. He whispered, "Bring His Lordship back!"

Shen Zechuan was in ill health, and he had ruined his right hand back in Dunzhou. Furthermore, he was now lord of the six prefectures. Should he die on the battlefield now in a moment of carelessness, the painstaking effort of everyone in Zhongbo would be for naught.

Qiao Tianya's face was impassive.

Yao Wenyu looked pleadingly at him and said with desperate emphasis, "The ruler who commands all does not put himself in harm's way!"

Shen Zechuan shook drops of blood off Avalanche and brought Frostfall to a halt in a little clearing in the chaos. He turned his face into the wind, his chest heaving; the two fingers on his right hand throbbed faintly. He stood at the very front of the battle, looking out at the bleak world. He was not strong, but he would not fall. In the dim light of the coming dawn, he was like a single speck of sand, but also like the glittering steel blade nailed to the ground before the city of Duanzhou.

He was cunning, unscrupulous, and vindictive.

He was not cut out to be an emperor at all.

But—

Qiao Tianya leaned out of the saddle and raised a hand to flick the air above Yao Wenyu's forehead. Just as Yao Wenyu thought he would do as he was told, Qiao Tianya turned his horse around and bellowed, "Unto death we follow His Lordship!"

Light burst across the horizon, and the vast expanse of darkness dispersed into dawn in the blink of an eye. Shen Zechuan's blade slid along his outer thigh, its sharp edge catching the light.

Like its master, Frostfall would only move forward.

Forward!

The Embroidered Uniform Cavalry shouted in a solemn chorus, “Unto death we follow His Lordship!”

In the eyes of these people, he was the sovereign who heralded the dawn of the new age.

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Chapter 248:
No-Name

THE BIANSHA HORSEMEN who'd come to mount a surprise attack at the west gate didn't expect a light cavalry like this to be concealed within the city. This cavalry rode ponies just like theirs, advancing and retreating freely through the gloomy landscape.

Shen Zechuan was a white-feathered bird amid a flock of crows. The glint of the blade he had wiped clean cut through the first glimmer of dawn. Before the horsemen could regroup for a second attack, he commanded, "Retreat."

Ding Tao directed the commoners' evacuation. The west gate of the city had been breached; this place would soon be a battlefield. Li Xiong slung Gao Zhongxiong's limp arm over his shoulder and escorted Kong Ling and Yao Wenyu away, following the crowd of commoners.

The Embroidered Uniform Cavalry retreated into the city and stood at attention inside the gate. They were few in number, but they were the most elite fighters of Zhongbo. At the base of the wall, the west gate's remaining garrison soldiers, not daring to delay, pushed out the rolling platform that held a mobile gable wall, ready to replace the collapsed gate. This kind of movable wall, though much thinner than the city gate, was filled with lime mortar and topped with recessed grooves for the placement of heavy bows.

The eagle banner flapped in the wind. The Biansha Horsemen began to beat their drums. The noise from the small, round drums was deafening, and the ponies pawed at the ground, poised for action. They didn't give Duanzhou any further opportunity to patch up their defenses. Spurred by the beat of the drums, they launched their second assault before the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry could make a move.

The sound of hooves was like a cloudburst, hammering down with enough violence to shake the earth. Gravel skittered over the ground, and clouds of dust choked their mouths and noses. The terrifying momentum of the Biansha Horsemen came bearing down on them, as swift and fierce as a pack of starving beasts.

Qiao Tianya's horse was right behind Frostfall. He gripped his reins and said, "Ready—"

It was as if the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry had fallen into a trance. The wind buffeted their cheeks, but it carried off only silence; even the sound of their breathing seemed to have vanished. The soldier leading the Biansha charge pressed in toward Shen Zechuan, so close he smelled the stench of the man's sweat and saw the twisted scowl on his face.

Time seemed to stand still.

Shen Zechuan flashed his blade and galloped forward. As Frostfall crashed into the enemy vanguard, he called, "Charge!"

Charge!

Like a roiling tide of dark clouds, the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry and the Biansha Horsemen collided in the tunnel under the city wall. Steel blades and scimitars screamed as they crossed. There were no battle tactics at the west gate; the only strategy was to kill. Only by stopping the Biansha Horsemen here could they continue to defend Duanzhou. Shen Zechuan had to lead the charge from the very front; this was a blunt method to rally the hearts of Duanzhou's people.

The horsemen were packed so tightly in the gateway tunnel that they nearly blocked out the light. Both parties crowded in as the sound of combat thundered through the skies. Sprays of blood soaked Shen Zechuan's sleeves. He swung his saber, cutting down the enemies before him. The morning light broke through the clouds and shone upon his cheeks, grimy with blood and sweat. Eyes cold and ruthless, he cut down the Biansha Horsemen one by one and charged ahead with unstoppable momentum.

These Biansha Horsemen were a small sneak-attack squadron that had circled around to the west side of the city. They were no match for the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry, whose morale was at an all-time high, and were repeatedly beaten back in the tunnel. They'd suffered losses in both assaults on the gate, and eventually, they had no choice but to withdraw. The garrison troops saw their chance and acted; the moment Shen Zechuan retreated back into the city, they pushed the mobile gable wall into place and blocked the destroyed city gate.

The wheels of the wagon clicked as they rotated. The garrison soldiers pushing yelled, “We’re running out of arrows!”

Shen Zechuan reined in his horse. Avalanche hung at his side, dripping blood over every hoofprint. “Let down the auxiliary gate.”

The garrison troops atop the city wall hauled in the rope, and amid the rapid clicks of interlocking gears, the overhanging gate crashed to the ground, blocking the interior end of the tunnel. This was Duanzhou’s second defensive wall, specifically designed to deal with situations like this.

Shen Zechuan’s right hand could hold his blade no longer. The instant he stopped moving, his fingers throbbed with pain. After feeling around in his sleeve pocket, he only managed to find Xiao Chiye’s blue handkerchief. He used it to secure the hilt of Avalanche to his palm, binding his two fingers tightly to ensure the blade didn’t slip from his hand.

“Send word to the north and south gates,” Shen Zechuan said. “Tell them to drop the auxiliary gates now.”

Amur had possessed the military map of Zhongbo as far back as seven years ago. He must know Duanzhou and Dunzhou like the back of his hand. Judging from Hassen’s tactics of swift strikes and precise targeting, he must have also studied this map. Duanzhou was now an isolated city. It would be unwise to defend only the east gate.

“If we lower the auxiliary gates, we won’t be able to leave.” Qiao Tianya watched as morning light glazed the city walls. “The beacon towers have yet to be lit.”

“Surely someone will light the beacon towers in Dunzhou and Mount Luo.” Shen Zechuan clenched his fist. “The east gate is still open. As long as we can light another tower on the Bianjun side, reinforcements from the Bianjun Commandery will come.”

Hassen must have used some method to delay Xiao Chiye, but Xiao Chiye would come—of this he had no doubt. That was why Hassen had opted for a swift surprise attack. He wanted to fight a quick battle so he could crack Duanzhou open and pick the granaries clean, then make his escape before Xiao Chiye arrived with reinforcements. He had no wish to engage Xiao Chiye in a head-to-head battle in Zhongbo.

After cutting a wide swath through the Biansha infantrymen, Yin Chang retreated back through the gate with his garrison troops. As long as he could keep the infantry soldiers from laying planks down over the trench, the east gate would be spared the brunt of the Biansha Horsemen's assault for now.

"Retreat, retreat! Don't risk your fucking life here—we have a long battle to fight with these sons of bitches." Yin Chang wiped blood from his face and kicked the backsides of some of the slower garrison soldiers.

All four gates of Duanzhou had to be defended and secured, a considerable challenge for only twenty thousand garrison troops. Yin Chang needed to stall for time. Until reinforcements came, his troops had to withstand the combined assault of the horsemen and infantry, and preserve their strength between the enemy's attacks.

The garrison troops filed back into the city. Yin Chang was in the last group to go through. As he prepared to cross the trench, he heard the pounding of hooves behind him and broke out in a cold sweat. Relying on the instincts of a seasoned veteran, the old man dove to the ground and shouted, "Draw your blades!"

The bright crescent of a scimitar's blade slashed through the air where Yin Chang's head had been. Heart pounding, the old man rubbed his neck and shouted, "Shouldn't ya say something before you attack?!"

Joril couldn't understand Yin Chang's words. The powerful hooves of his mount stomped their way in front of Yin Chang. Yin Chang rolled out of the way, covering himself in dust.

"What nimble prey," Joril said, plainly delighted.

Yin Chang couldn't understand Joril either. He braced one hand on the ground and grasped his blade with the other as he faced Joril in a bizarre confrontation beside the trench.

Wiping his red nose with a thumb that reeked of dirt, Yin Chang made his assessment: *Ruthless*.

The expression in this man's eyes was as calm as the blue expanse of the sky. Even the din from the artillery bombardment couldn't sway him. He was one with the earth, poles apart from the raucous impression he gave. This was Joril's strength—he had unparalleled composure in times of crisis.

"You." Yin Chang's voice was hoarse, but still he said with certainty, "You were in Cizhou seven years ago."

Joril understood "Cizhou." He waved his scimitar at Yin Chang and said in a broken version of the Zhou tongue, "I, were there. With, this blade."

A strong wind tousled Yin Chang's white hair. In a blink, the old man braced himself and lunged. He leapt into the air, swinging his blade toward Joril's head. Joril raised his scimitar to block the blow, and the pony under him lurched several steps back from the impact of Yin Chang's strike.

Joril understood at once. "You…know I?"

Yin Chang's hands trembled slightly as he landed. He slid his feet wider for stability and burst out laughing. "I know you, but you don't know me. Seven years ago in Cizhou, I watched you people burn down houses and slaughter the city." His expression abruptly went cold and stiff. "You took away their heads."

Joril half listened and half guessed. He waited until Yin Chang was done speaking before untying the hemp rope around his waist, where the heads of Duanzhou's Chashi River scouts were hanging. He threw them toward Yin Chang, then said in the Biansha tongue, "I don't want them anymore. I want your head."

The heads rolled to Yin Chang's feet. They were all young faces. Yin Chang looked at them, then at Joril.

Though Yin Chang was silent, Joril could sense the roar coming from the ferocious beast in this old body.

"You should accord dignity to those who died in battle," Yin Chang said. "You *animals*."

With the help of the garrison troops, Fei Sheng quickly evacuated the commoners from the area around the east gate. He stood on the cleared streets and hesitated a moment, then pelted back toward the gate. Halfway there, he heard the clatter of hooves and turned to see Shen Zechuan leading the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry toward the east gate.

"On your horse!" Qiao Tianya tossed his riding crop to Fei Sheng.

Fei Sheng snatched it from the air and slowed down. When an unoccupied horse galloped past, he jumped on its back. Gripping the reins, he asked Qiao Tianya, "How's the west gate?"

"Breached."

The color drained from Fei Sheng's face.

Qiao Tianya continued, "…but His Lordship patched it up again."

"Can't you fucking finish your sentence?!"

Qiao Tianya burst out laughing. The two of them followed Shen Zechuan, galloping eastward. When they reached the wall, they saw the gate standing wide open. The garrison troops had yet to finish retreating inside.

Shen Zechuan dismounted and took long strides up the stairs to the top of the wall. Halfway there, the intense bombardment forced him to stop. He waved away ashes and dust and asked, "Are any parapets intact?"

"Not many." Covering his ears against the crashing of stones against the walls, Fei Sheng shouted, "The Biansha Horsemen switched to single-branch cannons!"

Shen Zechuan's heart sank. Hassen meant to smash the eastern wall of Duanzhou with continuous bombardment. He looked down along the battlements and saw that the Biansha Horsemen were gathering close to the trench.

"Open the sluice gates and release the water." Shen Zechuan's expression was dark. "They're about to charge."

"Open the sluice gates!" Fei Sheng shouted as he dashed southward along the battlement. Choking on dust, he covered his mouth and nose and immediately remembered the sight that had greeted him when he arrived. Grabbing a nearby garrison soldier, he asked, "Why haven't you closed the gates? The horsemen are about to attack!"

The soldier answered through coughs, "The commander—the commander's still out there!"

Stunned, Fei Sheng threw himself toward the outer wall and looked down, with no regard for the rocks flying past him. There were too many

soldiers and horses down there; he strained to find Yin Chang's white head among them.

"Come on…come on!" Fei Sheng muttered as he searched the field.

Yin Chang's blade was tangled with Joril's scimitar, the two of them struggling in a tug-of-war before the gate. The old man bellowed and leaned back as his feet slid forward. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see more horsemen heading toward them.

He couldn't drag this out.

Yin Chang let go of his blade. It dropped below the scimitar, and he snatched the falling hilt out of the air before breaking into a run toward the trench. The sluice gates on either side of the gate had yet to open; they were waiting for the garrison troops to cross.

Legs pumping, he felt scalding heat prickle on his back. He dropped to the ground and rolled, shouting, *"Shut the gate!"*

But the Biansha Horsemen behind him hadn't come to storm the gates at all. Taking advantage of the open gate, they tipped out bags of tits, the birds' tails alight with flames. The animals flew blindly in their panic, even setting the bags on fire. Fluttering madly, they swarmed across the trench and careened toward the gate.

The auxiliary gate hanging on the inside of the tunnel was made of wood. If it burned, the defense of the east gate would be lost.

Just before the trench, Yin Chang skidded to a stop and leapt up—but Joril was already riding up behind him. He snagged the back of Yin Chang's robe with his scimitar. Cloth ripped as he pulled Yin Chang to the ground.

Yin Chang jammed his blade into the dirt as Joril's pony tried to drag him off. He bellowed toward the wall, "Shut the gate! Release the water!"

"Fuck. *Fuck!*" Fei Sheng pushed himself away from the wall and flew down the stairs, shoving through the crowd as he sprinted toward the tunnel. "Hold on! You motherfucker!"

The flaming birds crashed against the city gates. Stray sparks fell onto the garrison troops, setting their clothes alight. The men rolled on the ground to put out the flames, then ran into the tunnel. The interior of the

city walls had water sacks on standby for extinguishing fires, but there were far too many birds. If they didn't shut the gates now, the auxiliary gate would catch fire too.

Shen Zechuan's throat was dry with dust from the unending bombardment. The sun rising in the east stung his eyes as he stood amid the clouds of debris and looked out. "Shut the gates."

The gates creaked. Fei Sheng was still jostling through the waves of soldiers surging back in. He was like duckweed struggling against the current, without anything to grasp onto. The light within the tunnel dimmed as the garrison troops crowded in, blocking Fei Sheng's view. He couldn't see the other side, much less what was happening across the trench.

"Don't shut the gates!" Fei Sheng desperately pushed the soldiers aside and cried, the words tumbling out. He'd never spoken so fast. "Don't shut them!"

With a *boom*, the exterior gate slammed shut. Darkness descended within the tunnel. The sluice gates on either side lifted, and the unfinished trench groaned under the sudden weight of the water, marking a boundary between the city and the horsemen.

Shen Zechuan raised his voice. "Put out the fire!"

Outside, Joril dragged Yin Chang backward. Hooves pounded around him. His saber, still in his hand, scraped the ground, even as he used his free hand to rip off the wineskin on his belt. He opened the cork with his teeth and poured wine all over his face. Then he tossed away the empty skin and wiped his hand over his eyes. Tilting his head to the sky, he laughed and shouted, "On Horseback!"

Fei Sheng fell to his knees inside the closed gate. Clawing at the gap with both hands, he said through gritted teeth, "Open the gate!"

Shen Zechuan pressed his lips into a thin line and watched Yin Chang, the rims of his eyes reddening.

Fei Sheng's fingers were bloody from clawing at the iron doors. He pounded on the gate. "Open the gate! I said *open the gate*!"

Joril lassoed his horsewhip around Yin Chang's neck and hauled the old man up. Yin Chang was still gripping his blade. His feet dangled above

the ground, but he met Joril's eyes, choking as he said, "Make—make it quick!"

Joril held his scimitar to the back of Yin Chang's neck. Just as he bore down, Yin Chang lurched up. Ignoring the strangling whip around his neck, the old man whipped his saber backward, the glint of the cutting edge flashing. He roared, twisting his arm up. Before Joril's blade could slice through Yin Chang's neck, Joril's head went flying instead.

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Yin Chang dropped to the ground, wheezing through the horsewhip still wrapped around his throat. Levering himself up on his elbows, he crawled a few feet in the direction of Duanzhou. Behind him a tidal wave of iron hooves was rising.

The no-name general.

Yin Chang laughed aloud, then began to cry.

Xiao-Sheng.

Taking sharp, urgent breaths, Yin Chang looked up at the dawn-streaked sky, then shouted at the city wall, his voice reverberating all the way to the clouds overhead. "Your Lordship—looks like the heavens are calling for a resounding victory!"

Thundering hooves engulfed the old man.

On the other side of the gate, there was silence. Fei Sheng slid down the iron surface, pressed to that tiny slit of light. Slumping against the gate, he sobbed like a child.

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Chapter 249:
Battle Tactics

THE REMAINDER of the flaming birds were barred safely outside the gate. The garrison troops immediately got to work. They darted in and out of the tunnel, dragging in water sacks and pouring them over the wood as a precaution.

Across the trench, the Biansha Horsemen had been whipped into a fury by the sight of Joril's corpse. Joril was a Lizard who had followed Amur deep into Zhongbo seven years ago. His presence here was a gift from Amur to Hassen. It was thanks to Joril that Hassen had been able to sever all of Duanzhou's external communications in just a few short days.

"Get him out of the way!" A Biansha Horseman looked toward the Duanzhou gate. "Reckless idiot… Buck up! Before Hassen arrives, we need to get across this trench!"

Yin Chang had successfully pulled up the planks and killed most of the infantrymen pushing the covered cart; his quick thinking had given the Biansha Horsemen new anxiety as they faced the trench and given the garrison troops inside the city a chance to catch their breath. But the trench before Duanzhou's gate was not yet a proper moat. The square bricks on the ends of the trench, in order to allow them to connect to the undug north and south sides, had not been solidly embedded. This trench couldn't stay filled for long. The sluice gates had been opened, and all the water in the cisterns had been emptied out. But even if the trench had been complete, the Biansha Horsemen would have soon thought of a way to cross it.

Before dark, the Biansha Horsemen would surely storm the east gate.

"Prepare the heavy stones." Shen Zechuan turned to Qiao Tianya. "Push the mounted crossbow up the wall!"

The garrison troops at the foot of the wall worked as one to push the mounted crossbow up along a wide passageway. The Biansha Horsemen's single-branch cannons kept up their onslaught; the heavy rocks had already smashed an opening in the east wall. Broken bricks littered the ground

along with clumps of clay and mud; a few of the battlements had completely collapsed. The garrison troops covered their heads and dodged debris as they braced their backs against the mounted crossbow to keep it from sliding down. But it was no use. The men's heels scraped against the ground as the weight of the crossbow dragged them back down the incline. "It's too heavy!"

As Qiao Tianya leapt over the stairs to help, he spotted a man in commoner's clothes approaching. The man widened his stance and braced both palms against the bottom of the crossbow.

Ji Gang, his white hair dark with dust, bellowed in a deep voice, "Heave!"

The soldiers immediately felt the weight on their backs lighten. Veins throbbed at Ji Gang's temples. He took one step after another, slowly pushing the mounted crossbow up the slope. By the time the large machine was in position, both of Ji Gang's arms were trembling, and his back was drenched in sweat.

By now it was midmorning, and the sun hung high in the sky. Soldiers ran everywhere, their faces smeared with a mixture of sweat and the ever-present dust, which clogged their mouths and noses and made them choke. They didn't dare recklessly shoot from the battlements, lest the enemy troops trick them into depleting their inventory. They would need all their arrows for the Biansha Horsemen's next charge. The same went for the mounted crossbow. This killing weapon could not be activated rashly. They needed it to strike a single, lethal blow—just as Yin Chang had killed Joril. It had to hurt.

"Split the garrison troops into three squadrons to defend the three gates. The Embroidered Uniform Cavalry will await orders at the east gate." Shen Zechuan raised the hand with Avalanche tied to it and used his knuckles to wipe sweat from his cheek. "We must secure the remaining three gates before nightfall."

Duanzhou's granaries were full to bursting. If the Biansha Horsemen wanted to lay siege to the city, it would take at least a month to deplete Duanzhou's food supplies and wear the city down. But Hassen wanted a quick battle; he wouldn't opt for a long siege. The Biansha Horsemen had been attacking relentlessly since last night. If they reached an impasse at the

east gate, they'd circle around to the other three gates and try those, the same way they had snuck up on the west gate.

Shen Zechuan had lowered the auxiliary gates in the north, west, and south, but this was not a long-term solution. The Biansha Horsemen had siege weapons. Their carts, equipped with thick, sturdy battering rams, could break down the iron city gates, followed by the wooden auxiliary gates, with only a little effort, and the Biansha Horsemen would enter the city unobstructed.

"Oil. And rocks." Shen Zechuan listed the supplies that needed replenishing. "Take apart the collapsed watchtowers. Have the garrison troops at the other three gates take whatever they can use to the top of the walls. When they catch sight of the enemy, they're to sound the horn and throw down bricks and rubble to obstruct them."

He had to think of a way to get out of the city.

Shen Zechuan looked toward the southeastern horizon, where the beacon tower stood dark and silent.

The advisors had gathered at the riding track. This place, being wide and spacious, was already packed with groups of displaced commoners. Gao Zhongxiong had regained a bit of his composure. He leaned over to rub his trembling calves and said to Kong Ling, "J-just now, at the gate…"

The moment he got anxious, he started stammering again.

Kong Ling soothed him. "No harm done. Thinking to bring Yuanzhuo with you at a time like that is already courageous and deserving of praise. Back in my younger days in Dunzhou, when I learned the cavalry had breached the city, I couldn't think of anything at all."

Yao Wenyu was clutching his sleeves when a waving hand interrupted his silent train of thought. He glanced over and saw that the woman from earlier had sent her child to return his handkerchief. Yao Wenyu raised his hand but did not take the handkerchief. Instead, he reached out with dust-tainted fingers and gently touched the child's cheek.

Alive.

Yao Wenyu's chest heaved slightly.

The dense sound of a thousand footsteps rumbled beside the riding track as garrison troops ran past on their way to the walls.

"Deliver bows and arrows to the west gate!" The deputy general in the lead sheathed his blade, freeing his hands to move equipment. "Leave the collapsed watchtower to us!"

"There's not enough," the soldier at the top of the wall answered. "Only one tower collapsed. It's not enough!"

Duanzhou was well-stocked with defensive weapons, but the armory had already been emptied to support the east gate. The remaining gates had to pick from what was left to share between them. A great number of their arrows had already been depleted that morning, and now they had to make up for the shortfall over at the west gate, where the mobile gable wall was temporarily blocking the way. While they hesitated, at a loss for what to do, a man on the riding track suddenly stood up. Weighing an old hoe in his hand, he asked, "Can this thing be thrown?"

"Not if you want it back!" the deputy replied.

"Take it, then." The man tried his best to speak the official dialect. "The city is under siege. If we can't kill the horsemen, what will I use this hoe for? Are you short men?"

The deputy didn't answer, no doubt remembering how they had clashed with the commoners just this morning at the west gate. But one by one, people on the field began to rise. They were all men in their prime, carrying with them only their own farming tools. They shouted at the garrison troops, "Are you short men? If so, we are all men here!"

The Biansha Horsemen's artillery assault persisted until evening. The east gate was patched up over and over again, until the last of the parapet walls were nearly smashed down to nothing. Yet the Biansha Horsemen showed no intention of stopping. This was the real bombardment—they wouldn't stop until the eastern city wall had given way.

"The single-branch cannons shoot rocks." Crouching behind the battlement, Qiao Tianya spoke to Shen Zechuan under the sounds of stone

smashing against the walls. “They’re out in the open field; they’ve got all the rocks they could wish for. If this keeps up for another two days, then even if the Biansha Horsemen don’t cross the trench, the city wall will collapse.”

“Hassen can’t wait two days.” Shen Zechuan’s cheeks were filthy. “The Biansha Horsemen will attack before nightfall.”

Now that the garrison troops had lost Yin Chang, the Biansha Horsemen were eager to test their remaining strength. Having endured a full day of bombardment, the troops were exhausted. It was an excellent opportunity for the Biansha Horsemen to advance.

“When they cross the trench, we’ll open the gates,” Shen Zechuan said. “The garrison troops will stay here and defend the walls. The Embroidered Uniform Cavalry will fend off the attack.”

“Fei Sheng and I—”

“You and I.” Shen Zechuan raised his eyes. “You’ll alternate with me. As soon as you beat back the horsemen’s charge, retreat into the city. Don’t linger outside the walls.”

The number of Biansha Horsemen far exceeded that of the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry. A steel needle was no match for a broad axe head-on. But Shen Zechuan wasn’t looking to defeat their army—he merely had to arrest their momentum. Once their forces were in disarray, he could return to a defensive position.

Qiao Tianya licked his lips and said grimly, “You’re the prefectural governor, not a general.”

Shen Zechuan didn’t answer. He stood, putting a hand on the wall for support. In the dimming light of day, he looked past the dense cluster of Biansha Horsemen at the Chashi River. The wide band of the river was like a jade belt soaked in the sunset, reflecting the billowing clouds where the saker falcons soared.

A ruthless edge glinted in Shen Zechuan’s eyes. “I’m the governor of Zhongbo.”

The clouds above the Chashi River were still scudding before the wind when the wall under Shen Zechuan’s hand quaked. A thunderous

boom sounded below them.

"The catapults!" The garrison soldier on the watchtower sounded the alarm: "Here come the catapults!"

After taking a full day's rest behind the single-branch cannons, the catapults that had served as a prelude to last night's battle were back in action. The Biansha Horsemen split into squadrons, tapping on their drums to swiftly pass information across the battlefield.

Shen Zechuan yanked off his cumbersome wide-sleeved robe, secured that singular armguard tightly, and descended the steps to the base of the city wall where Frostfall waited, tossing its head. He swung astride his horse and said to Qiao Tianya, "Stay vigilant at the other three gates."

Qiao Tianya bowed, then shouted, "Your Lordship—to victory!"

Shen Zechuan tugged at the reins and turned the horse around, steering it toward the gate tunnel. His lovely visage was streaked with blood and sweat; only his eyes remained bright. Behind him, the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry steadied their breathing—they, too, wanted to end this battle quickly.

A war steed shifted as Fei Sheng climbed into the saddle and pulled the hilt of his Xiuchun saber in front of him. His bloodshot eyes fixed on Shen Zechuan. "I am Your Lordship's guard." He paused, then drew his blade and raised his voice. "We are Your Lordship's shields!"

Shen Zechuan gave him a small nod, and Frostfall trotted into the arched gateway tunnel. In the brief moment of silence as he faced the gate and waited for it to open, he proclaimed, "I live and die with all of you."

The city gates swung inward with a dull thud once again. Their opening ushered in the last of the daylight, which wove in and out between countless hooves.

On the field outside, the eagle banner flew high in the twilight glow. A horseman waiting behind the reorganized infantry hoisted the flagpole, then swung it down as he shouted in the Biansha tongue, *"Charge!"*

Wisps of Fei Sheng's hair, knocked loose from its knot, fluttered in the wind. His badly scraped fingers gripped the hilt of his blade. As Shen Zechuan spurred his horse onward, Fei Sheng shouted, "To victory!"

Frostfall galloped forth, treading over the dust.

The Biansha infantry had abandoned their shields. They knelt in formation, holding planks to push out over the trench. As the horsemen rode past, the infantry erected narrow bridges. The moment they were in place, men with scimitars streamed across the trench and came head to head with the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry at the foot of the wall.

After a full day's rest outside the city as their cannons worked, the Biansha Horsemen were bursting with energy. They had drunk their fill of milk tea and padded their stomachs with meat jerky. They had thought to face an exhausted garrison troop; they didn't expect the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry to also be sufficiently rested and fed on dry rations. Shen Zechuan hadn't given the Biansha Horsemen a chance to take advantage of the enemy's fatigue.

There was a flurry of hooves as the two sides collided, blade crashing against blade.

Avalanche was a long, slim blade; it never met force with force against the Biansha scimitars, for Shen Zechuan artfully went straight for enemy throats. His armguard felt heavier with each fresh strike, and blood trickled into his sleeve and down his arm, staining half his body red.

The bridges the horsemen had hastily erected were too narrow to admit more than a few Biansha Horsemen at a time. Their numbers were not enough to prevail against the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry at close quarters. The horsemen were forced to retreat across the trench and regroup.

The second their enemy withdrew, Shen Zechuan wheeled his horse around and returned to the city. The gates shut again behind him as he galloped back through the tunnel, where torches were already lit. It was now late in the evening.

Shen Zechuan's right arm felt heavy and sluggish. When he had still been in the Embroidered Uniform Guard, he had never fought so intensely for such a long period of time. And since arriving in Zhongbo, he had neglected his martial arts training. He was aware now of how slow his reactions were.

He couldn't feel his injured fingers at all anymore.

Using his left hand, Shen Zechuan wiped blood from his face without expression, then swapped positions with Qiao Tianya.

The Embroidered Uniform Cavalry had rested for scarcely two hours when the war drums sounded again, and the horsemen began their second attack. This time, Qiao Tianya led the resistance and didn't return until after midnight.

"They're sending in fresh groups, taking turns to wear us down." Fei Sheng watched the Biansha Horsemen's shifting torches from atop the battlements. "At this rate, they can keep going past daybreak."

"Hassen must have obscured the size of his troops." Shen Zechuan leaned against the wall for a rest and took several large bites of a steamed bun. "Otherwise, there would be word from Ce'an by now."

Before Xiao Chiye had ridden south, he had played this scenario out with Lu Guangbai. The purpose of his trip to Bianjun was to lure Hassen into mobilizing his troops—but the sign of this plan's success was the Biansha Horsemen diverting troops from the front lines in Libei. Lu Guangbai had yet to come to Duanzhou's aid, which meant that the assaults in the north had not let up. Hassen had been planning this attack on Duanzhou for a long time. If he could hide troops like this, it was likely Amur already had more than the six tribes behind him.

"I have to bring the old man back," Fei Sheng said, looking out at the horsemen.

Shen Zechuan swallowed the last of his steamed bun with difficulty and stood up. Avalanche was still bound to his hand. He hadn't slept for a day and a night.

"We need a plan for that." Shen Zechuan raised his head slightly. "Qiao Tianya needn't draw back next time they attack. We'll all head out of the city together."

Fei Sheng looked back at him.

The expression in Shen Zechuan's eyes was dark. He said clearly, "Fuck."

Fei Sheng's face slowly unfroze from its stiff mask of grief. He didn't know why, but he suddenly burst into laughter. He laughed and laughed,

then raised a hand to wipe his tears and echoed, “Fuck.”

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Chapter 250:
Siege

PAST MIDNIGHT, gloomy clouds concealed the moon.

After regrouping, the Biansha Horsemen withdrew their offensive line and replaced the men with the elite forces from the first attack. The torches that had burned since nightfall suddenly went out, and the drums that had been sounding stopped. The outskirts of Duanzhou were plunged into darkness. Without the light from the enemy torches, the archers along the city wall couldn't see across the trench. A sentry climbed the only remaining watchtower and carefully stepped onto the railing, craning his neck to survey from high above the ground.

"I can't see." Sweat dripped from his temples as he gestured down to the wall. "It's too dark!"

The onslaught from the single-branch cannons and catapults had ceased too. Other than the scattered sounds of hooves, they could glean nothing from within the city. In this rare silence, the garrison troops trod lightly, as if afraid of startling a great beast. Those who were sitting rose to their feet, sensing a storm was coming.

The garrison troops stationed within the gateway tunnel filed out, dragging with them the corpses of their fellow soldiers to make way for the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry. They poured clean water over the green stone slabs and rinsed the hooves of the horses, dispelling the metallic stench of blood.

The ranks of Biansha Horsemen shifted. They planned to pass over the plank bridges they had newly erected, then form a wall before the city gate. After several clashes with the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry, their enemy had figured them out—to counter the steel needle, they would form a brick that could smash it to pieces.

The garrison troops stationed along the top of the city wall stood at rapt attention, not daring to move even to wipe sweat from their brows.

Their throats bobbed as they listened to the clatter of hooves and silently counted down the minutes in their hearts.

The Biansha Horsemen charged toward the gate.

The hooves of their ponies clattered over the plank bridges, the sound resounding through the trench.

Now!

The garrison troops waved their banners and shouted hoarsely, "Heave!"

The heavy rocks at the top of the city wall started rolling along wooden channels, rumbling as they bounced past some narrower sections, then crashed over the lip and flew out toward the trench. Men and horses alike, hidden in the darkness, were knocked to the ground by the rain of stone from above, unable to block the sudden assault. More than half of the plank bridges splintered, and countless horsemen tumbled into the trench.

The city gate swung open. Qiao Tianya and Fei Sheng flanked Shen Zechuan, who led the charge as the three squads behind them burst from the tunnel. The Biansha Horsemen's formation had fallen into disarray under the hail of stone, and the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry attacked wherever they saw an opening, tearing the Biansha Horsemen's squadron into pieces starting from the trench.

Archers replaced the rock-pushers at the top of the city wall. Hot oil was poured over arrowheads wrapped in tattered rags. The instant the rags ignited, the soldiers loosed the arrows. The Biansha Horsemen no longer had the cover of the infantry's cart nor the protection of armor; the moment the flaming arrows brushed their clothing, they began to burn.

In a blink, the trench was aglow with firelight.

Fei Sheng had already led the right flank to charge across the trench over the enemy's plank bridges. He bent low over his horse's neck in the night wind and lashed his mount to greater speed. As he passed Yin Chang's body, he leaned down to snatch the old man's blade. As soon as the hilt was firmly in his hand, he turned aside to rub his face hard against his shoulder, then thrust the blade into the empty sheath on his back.

Squinting against the gale, Fei Sheng turned his horse's head and galloped for the beacon tower in the southeast.

Even in the dark, the Biansha Horsemen spotted a group of cavalrymen breaking off from the rest. Before their riders could close the gap, Shen Zechuan crossed the trench and had them by the throat. The center and left flanks of the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry were here to cover Fei Sheng's escape—they gave the enemy no opportunity to follow. Setting their backs to the burning trench, they fought under the rain of arrows.

The scattered Biansha Horsemen speedily regrouped, but the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry was just as quick. Neither held an advantage over the other in the quality of their mounts; the only difference was in the speed of their blades.

Qiao Tianya's face was barely discernible beneath the blood spatter. He wiped his blade on his sleeve and whistled as he rode behind Shen Zechuan.

"Say, Your Lordship." Qiao Tianya finished cleaning his sword and gestured to himself with it. "What do you think of this loyal blade?"

"As fast as Avalanche," Shen Zechuan said between bursts of sparks in the dark night.

Qiao Tianya's tattered sleeve was drawn back, exposing his bare arm. He didn't even bother with armguards—he was like a blade without a sheath. He turned and said ambiguously, "Don't go saying that to Yuanzhuo. What a huge misunderstanding that'd be. I'm not fast where it counts."

"Then I'm—" Shen Zechuan flipped his wrist and blocked the strike from a scimitar behind Qiao Tianya. Blood splashed Qiao Tianya's face as steel shrieked in his ear. Calmly, Shen Zechuan finished, "—so very happy for Yuanzhuo."

The Embroidered Uniform Cavalry behind them reformed, and Shen Zechuan fell silent, letting Avalanche hang limp at his side. He turned Frostfall to face the Biansha Horsemen's single-branch cannon, then broke into a gallop.

The Biansha runner in charge of relaying commands raced through the ranks waving a small flag. Pointing at the siege weapons, he yelled, “Retract the cannons!”

But the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry was too fast. The Scorpion guarding the cannon swung his hammer at Shen Zechuan. Just before it hit, Shen Zechuan righted his grip on Avalanche and rolled out of the saddle. Frostfall nimbly danced away from the attack, and the Scorpion’s hammer missed the horse’s legs. He turned, cursing in the Biansha tongue, “Cunning little—”

Shen Zechuan pounced. The Scorpion was tall and sturdy, but Shen Zechuan was on him in an instant, clambering onto his back. He locked an arm around the Scorpion’s neck, exposing his throat, then pressed Avalanche to his neck and sliced the blade across.

But his right hand was too weak—he failed to slit the Scorpion’s throat cleanly.

Blood spurted from the Scorpion’s neck, but the hammer he brandished didn’t fall. Letting loose a rattling, inhuman gasp, the man reached back with his free hand and grabbed Shen Zechuan.

A drop of blood trickled down the ridge of Shen Zechuan’s brow. He clung on tight, resisting the man’s immense strength, and drew the blade across the Scorpion’s neck again. He sawed Avalanche back and forth as if butchering livestock, reducing the man’s throat to a bloody pulp.

The relentless act of slaughter sent a chill down the backs of the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry behind him.

The Scorpion crashed to the ground, flinging both his hammer and Shen Zechuan into the dirt.

Frostfall had already cantered back to its master; Shen Zechuan climbed to his feet and mounted again. Qiao Tianya nudged the hammer’s handle up with his toe and hefted it in his hand, then swung it down hard on one side of a nearby cannon. The stand promptly splintered, and the entire machine tilted to the side.

The sound of wood splitting echoed across the fields, and the fire spread with it.

Fei Sheng, torch in hand, had led the right flank to the beacon tower at a breakneck gallop. Breathing hard, he dismounted on unsteady legs and stumbled over to support himself on the side of the steps, then scrambled up the tower on all fours.

The Biansha Horsemen shouted as they pursued them over the fields. While Fei Sheng climbed, the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry held them back at the foot of the tower.

Fei Sheng sprinted up the steps. When he reached the platform holding the fire pit, he tossed his torch in. The dry tinder inside burst into flames. He took two steps back and breathed, "We made it."

Far away, on Duanzhou's city wall, the garrison troops cried aloud and shouted across the field of battle, "It's lit!"

Frostfall danced back, and Shen Zechuan ordered, "Retreat!"

Atop the beacon tower, the flame blazed. Just a few more minutes, and the beacon towers to the east should start lighting up one after another. Fei Sheng pressed a hand to his chest and felt his eyes grow hot. But before he could wipe them, a sudden gust of wind scattered ash and dust everywhere. The sky that had been overcast for half the night rumbled ominously, and a few warning drops pattered down.

Before the people in Duanzhou could erupt in cheers, the clouds unleashed a torrential downpour, splashing cold water all over Fei Sheng's face.

It was raining.

The flames in the beacon tower were like delicate flowers swaying in the storm winds, their heads pressed down by the pounding of the water. Gradually, the fire shrank.

Fei Sheng lunged toward the platform. Holding his hands up to shield the fire from the rain, he raged, "Curse heaven for a dog!"

No doubt Duanzhou was due for a bout of rain after several days of clear skies. The rain came down in sheets. The trench at the east gate wouldn't lack for water—but it would be near impossible to light the beacon tower again.

"Come on…light up—screw you!" Fei Sheng struck his flint over and over. But this sudden cloudburst was too heavy, and both his hands were already soaking wet.

He couldn't get a spark.

This summer squall had come without warning, but it would likely stop as quickly as it came. As long as they could retreat back to the city, they would have another chance.

Under the walls, Shen Zechuan steeled himself and waved his blade toward the southeast to signal to Fei Sheng. "Withdraw!"

Fei Sheng's vision blurred. He blamed it on the heavy rain. He frantically struck the flint again and watched the sparks splutter and die.

Old man.

Fei Sheng's fingernails were still bloody from clawing at the gate. His hands trembled as he raked through the hay in the pit to find a few still-smoldering pieces.

It's too hard to be a hero.

Forcing his reddened eyes wide, Fei Sheng pulled the book he used for information gathering from his lapels and stuffed it into the pit. He leaned over and blew on the embers, the smoke choking him until he couldn't breathe.

In all my life—

Fei Sheng blew on the small fire until tongues of flame licked at the edges of the book. Suddenly, the fire flared up and almost singed Fei Sheng's hair. He fell backward onto the ground and spat.

—this is the only time I've ever sacrificed myself for others!

The twice-lit beacon tower's smoke didn't rise high in this downpour, but it was enough. Heeding the glow of this one tiny spark in the southeast, countless flames in the distance lit up in succession. The light spread along the beacon towers, a long, snaking dragon that flickered in the heavy rain.

Fei Sheng took a few steps to the edge of the tower and prepared to jump down. But when he looked below, his shout of triumph stalled in his throat, and he stepped back again.

The flood of Biansha Horsemen had surrounded the beacon tower on all sides. The right flank of the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry was as slender as a stalk of wheat in the face of this swarm.

Fei Sheng's clothes were already drenched. He flipped his Xiuchun saber in his hand, its blade chipped from the fighting, and said as if to the rain, "I told you a long time ago. Heroes don't come to good ends."

The rain roared down on Fei Sheng, as if it were arguing back. The water washed away the blood on his face. He tossed his Xiuchun saber aside. Stepping up to the edge of the beacon tower, he drew Yin Chang's blade and shouted in the direction of Duanzhou: "Your Lordship!" His chest heaved. "Erect a stone tablet for me. Engrave it with the words 'Loyal and Courageous, Old Fei the Tenth.' I want to face the Chashi River with the old man and stand guard over Duanzhou for you for ten thousand years!"

Shen Zechuan spurred his horse on. Rainwater splashed across his eyes.

Duanzhou.

Zhongbo.

He was no longer the frigid wind coursing through the land. There were countless figures behind him. A heavy weight lay upon his shoulders, dragging the Shen Zechuan who had once drifted through the world firmly back to the ground. He stepped solidly on this expanse of land; he couldn't —

The governor lifted his head high under the torrential rain and roared, "Break through their lines!"

Fei Sheng leapt down from the beacon tower, broke his fall with a roll, and jumped to his feet. Wielding Yin Chang's blade, he hacked at the knees of the nearest Biansha ponies and charged forward in a spray of sludge and rain. The Biansha Horsemen swarmed like a colony of ants, scattering the right flank of the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry.

The glint of Avalanche cut through the rain. Hooves trampled corpses underfoot to break out of the enemy encirclement toward the southeast.

Fei Sheng blocked a swinging scimitar with his saber, skidding backward from the force. Suddenly, the sound of an explosion reverberated

through the torrential rain. Fei Sheng toppled backward and collapsed into the mud. He nearly wept with joy as he swiped water off his face. “Reinforcements!”

More explosions echoed from the south side of Duanzhou. Huo Lingyun blasted a path through the Biansha Horsemen with his squad of musket-wielding Embroidered Uniform Cavalry. He reloaded his weapon and plunged into the ranks of the horsemen, shooting in all directions without even pausing to flick the rainwater out of his eyes.

Behind him, Tantai Hu could no longer hold himself back. He drew his blade and thundered, “Motherfucking Biansha baldies! Your Granddaddy Hu is home!”

The vanguard of the Dunzhou Garrison Troops had come.

Thick clouds obscured the canopy of heaven. By the time the rain stopped, the city gate was once again tightly shut.

Shen Zechuan gasped for breath. His fingers were white from the waterlogged battle. When he dismounted, the water in his boots streamed out and squelched with every step. “Remove your blades. Take a break.”

The Embroidered Uniform Cavalry dismounted one after another and began stuffing themselves with food the garrison troops had brought. They replaced their chipped blades with whole ones and dragged themselves off to the makeshift shacks built at the foot of the wall to rest. Time was precious; they didn’t waste it changing their clothes. They merely wrapped thin blankets around their shoulders and took a few sips of hot tea before falling asleep sitting up against the wall.

Tantai Hu took off his helmet and followed Shen Zechuan up to the battlements. Huo Lingyun followed closely behind and gave his report. “I was patrolling north along the Chashi River. Halfway there, I discovered everyone at Luo-Sand Relay Station had been massacred. I tried to return to Duanzhou to report to Your Lordship, but there were too many horsemen along the route. I rode west and lit Dunzhou’s beacon tower.”

Shen Zechuan’s drenched hair was plastered to his cheeks. “What’s the situation in the north?”

“The horsemen have cut off all their roads south,” Tantai Hu said. “It doesn’t seem like they’re having an easy time of it either.”

They reached the top of the city wall and sat on the ground behind the few intact battlements. A rudimentary shed had been erected here, so it was dry at the very least.

Shen Zechuan spread open a military map, then unclasped the agate earring on his right ear, so dirty now it resembled a clump of mud, and tucked it into his lapels. He looked down at the map for a moment. “Thanks to the rain, there’s mud everywhere outside the gates. The Biansha Horsemen’s equipment is going to get bogged down. They won’t make any rash attacks before the rain stops.”

“But they won’t wait long, either.” Qiao Tianya pointed at Dunzhou. “They know more reinforcements from Dunzhou are coming.”

“The garrison troops are all infantry,” Tantai Hu said. “They’ve got to march the whole way. It will take another day for the majority of the troops to arrive.” He touched the scar on his eye. “My vanguard squad only has two thousand men.”

Fei Sheng was lying flat on the ground, hugging Yin Chang’s blade to his chest. He had no strength left to wail. He rasped, “The beacon tower in the southeast has been lit. We just need to get through tomorrow night—”

“The Biansha Horsemen are fast.” Huo Lingyun cut in. “If Hassen wants to intercept the reinforcements from Dunzhou, he’ll make it in time if he sends his troops around our south now. We can’t count on them reaching us tomorrow night.”

Hassen’s greatest advantage lay in his understanding of Zhongbo’s terrain. Unlike the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry, the Dunzhou Garrison Troops had to run on two legs. If the Biansha Horsemen intercepted them, they would be stalled west of the city, killing the last hope of Duanzhou.

“We have to hold out until reinforcements from Bianjun arrive.” Huo Lingyun traced his finger along the road from the Bianjun Commandery to Duanzhou. “Er-ye said it before he rode south: As soon as Hassen moves, Marshal Qi will circle around to Gedal to attack him from behind. No matter what, Hassen can’t afford to linger in Duanzhou. The city walls are

sturdy, and food is plentiful. At the very least, we can defend the city for two more days."

Two more days.

Everyone's hearts sank.

Qiao Tianya turned and peered over the wall. "A battle to the death, huh?"

Gloom shrouded the sky. The Chashi River, which even in the downpour had seemed magnificent, now dully reflected the clouds, like a length of tattered cotton. The stones of the city walls were darker after the rain. The garrison troops continued to clean up the battlefield in front of the city gate. It didn't matter which side the soldiers had fought on; as corpses, they were all stacked together. Each face was as pale as the next, lying in the mire like lush grass that had withered from drought.

Shen Zechuan descended the stairs alone and found a water vat to wash his face. He braced himself against the edge of the cistern and looked at his right hand. When he dipped it into the clear water, the bloodstains on the handkerchief blossomed and dissolved.

A-Ye's handkerchief was dirty.

Shen Zechuan untied the blue handkerchief. His two injured fingers were swollen from the tight binding. He sat down, then wrung the handkerchief out and laid it out to dry on his knees. He tilted his head back and looked up at the sky.

The wind grazed the tree beside him, scattering fallen leaves over the ground.

Leaning against the cistern, Shen Zechuan fell asleep.

Hassen scooped river water into his hands and scrubbed his face with it as he turned east in a silent farewell. A string of heads lay at his feet, and his scimitar was dyed red. His bare wrists extended from new leather armor; the sleeve pocket within contained a Chiti flower given to him by Dorlan.

A wise man cupped more river water in his hands and poured it in a trickle over Hassen's head. "May the gods bless and protect the Heroic Eagle of the Hanma tribe."

Hassen lifted his dripping face and looked at the old man. “Will I win?”

The wise man leaned over and stroked Hassen’s brow, his murky eyes seeming to contain the river itself. He appeared even older than the Chashi River was. His wisdom was not something a mere learned man like Bayim could match. He knelt, cupped Hassen’s face, and answered slowly, “You’re already standing where we’ve never stood before.”

“A wolf guards the path before me,” Hassen said. “I killed his father.”

“The king of wolves killed your brothers and sisters.” The wise one’s aged face was like the barren sand dunes in the desert. “The compassion bestowed by the heavenly god Chiti is accompanied by pain. He took away our grasslands and our blue sky; it’s long since been our lot to fight to the bitter end.”

Water dripped down Hassen’s chin. After a moment of silence, he said in a quiet voice, “I will win.”

Shen Zechuan was jolted awake by the sound of boulders striking the walls and the cacophony of running footsteps. The instant he opened his eyes, he shivered. He swiftly retied the handkerchief around his hand and rose to his feet.

“Light the torches!” he called.

Around him, torches were lit in a flash. Shen Zechuan climbed the stairs to the top of the city wall.

“There are Biansha Horsemen still crossing the river.” Fei Sheng gazed out into the distance. “They’re riding this way.”

Shen Zechuan drank the ginger soup Qiao Tianya handed him. “Hassen is coming.”

“The Biansha Horsemen have split into three.” Cold sweat broke out on Fei Sheng’s back. “This is bad. They’re going to attack from three sides!”

The Biansha Horsemen were like a falcon spreading its wings. The center converged into a solid mass of soldiers and horses; their numbers

now far exceeded those in the daytime. Meanwhile, the two flanks bore torches as they split off and sped around the city.

"Notify the south and north gates." Shen Zechuan smashed the bowl on the ground and raised his voice. "Be on guard—we defend to the death!"

Before the words were fully out of his mouth, half the battlement beside him collapsed with a stunning crash. The Embroidered Uniform Cavalry and the garrison troops sprinted toward their positions, while archers hoisted their bows and nocked their arrows.

Unlike the two flanks, Hassen's center squadron didn't move. Instead, he ordered all his catapults and single-branch cannons into motion. Boulders hurtled in waves toward the city wall, shaking the battlements and sending debris flying. The archers could hardly keep their bows steady.

The Biansha Horsemen beside Hassen raised their banners, and the horsemen in the rear abandoned their drums. Instead, they blew their horns. The two flanks had reached the north and south gates. The north gate loosed a rain of arrows. The south gate had only hoes and spades to throw.

The advisors on the riding track were taking a short break when they suddenly heard a resounding crash from the gate. The women and children burst into tears of alarm and huddled together.

"They're ramming the gates again!" Gao Zhongxiong trembled and hugged his remaining papers and brushes tightly.

The battering ram didn't succeed the first time, but not a moment later, a heavier crash rang out. The outer city gate buckled, and the shouts of the Biansha Horsemen filtered through the auxiliary gate. The commoners scrambled backward in a panic.

A soldier at the top of the city wall leapt down and drew his blade, shouting to the crowd, "Run for the alley!"

The battering ram slammed into the auxiliary gate with a loud *bang* and a shower of wood splinters that left an open gash behind.

The soldier raised a hand, sweat and tears flowing as he gasped for breath. As the battering ram sent the lower half of the wooden gate flying, he took the lead and broke into a run, brandishing his blade. "Charge!"

Kong Ling pushed the wheelchair this time as the advisors followed the commoners flooding toward the residential areas.

The garrison troops were no match for the horsemen's assault. Scimitars scythed across the garrison troops' throats as though reaping stalks of rice. The pounding of hooves melded into a continuous roar as they charged into the fleeing crowd.

The advisors had reached the mouth of an alley choked with commoners. Women fled while dragging their children by the hand and carrying grandparents on their backs. All the strong young men had taken their places before the splintered wooden gate, and the citizens who remained were totally powerless to fight back.

Gao Zhongxiong's papers slid out of his arms. His legs were shaking; his body trembled. Before he could squeeze his way into the alley, a horseman hooked the back of his collar with his scimitar and dragged him back. Gao Zhongxiong shouted in terror, tears and snot flowing down his face.

The man said something unintelligible and spat on Gao Zhongxiong.

Gao Zhongxiong, staring death in the face, summoned a burst of courage from who knew where and spat right back at the enemy rider. He screamed, "A scholar would rather die than be humiliated!"

To his surprise, the man fell off his horse with a thud. Drawing back a wooden door bar he'd picked up somewhere, Kong Ling urged him, "Quick, Shenwei, run!"

Hand to the back of his head where he'd been struck, the Biansha Horseman clambered to his feet and reached for his scimitar.

Gao Zhongxiong had already run a few steps, but when he saw Kong Ling falling behind, he yanked out the cloth bundle under his arm containing his brushes and inkstone and slammed it on the pate of the soldier, who was caught off guard and sent back to the ground.

Clinging to his makeshift weapon, Kong Ling bunched the hem of his robe into his hand and pushed Gao Zhongxiong into a run. The two of them raced into the alley. Gao Zhongxiong glanced back toward his abandoned bundle. "That—that inkstone was really expensive!"

Qiao Tianya galloped past, leading a column of Embroidered Uniform Cavalry straight into the horde of horsemen. A bloody battle ensued in the darkness before the wooden gate. The commoners in the alley covered their mouths, smothering their wails as they listened to the sounds of men dying just feet away, interspersed with the rolling thunder of boots from the garrison troops running past.

Yao Wenyu turned his wheelchair back, keeping to the edges of the crowd—but he couldn't hear any shouts from Qiao Tianya.

After an hour of fighting, torches suddenly shone into the mouth of the alley.

Wiping the blood from his chin, Qiao Tianya raised his head slightly in greeting to those inside. His gaze swept past Yao Wenyu to land on Kong Ling. "If it's not too much trouble, Mister Chengfeng, please lead everyone into the governor's manor."

Nodding eagerly, Kong Ling threw away the wooden bar in his hands. He hurried forward and called for the commoners to follow. Gao Zhongxiong dashed back out of the alley and bent to pick up what papers he could.

Stepping out of the weaving light of the torches, Qiao Tianya shifted a few steps toward Yao Wenyu.

"His Lordship—" Yao Wenyu began.

The wheelchair bumped lightly against the wall. Yuanzhuo grabbed the armrest with one hand to brace himself as Qiao Tianya cupped his cheeks and crowded him into a gloomy corner for a kiss. This kiss was not at all gentle; it blazed with hot desire beneath the tang of blood.

Qiao Tianya released him and swiped a smear of blood from Yuanzhuo's chin with a finger. Then he stepped back, got on his horse, and rode away, leaving Yao Wenyu covering his chin in shock.

Hassen cracked his horsewhip. His elite squad charged toward the plank bridges in front of the east gate, dragging mud and the battering ram carts behind him.

Tantai Hu raised an arm. "Ready!"

The mounted crossbow atop the city wall clicked into action. A dozen soldiers from the garrison troops loaded the long bolt. This giant crossbow with its exceptional destructive power represented their best chance of taking down Hassen from afar—but it was tough to find the opportune moment. Hassen was too close to the walls now; they had to force him to retreat to get a shot.

The water in the trench rippled from the passage of the men clattering over it. Hassen's horse had just reached the end of the bridge when a blade sliced toward his neck. He raised his scimitar and blocked the blow. Through the flames and dust, he saw Shen Zechuan.

Neither man gained an advantage over the other in this first test of blades. They sidestepped each other, each taking the measure of their opponent.

Red hair sweeping over his shoulder, Hassen spun his scimitar in his hand, then pointed the blade at Shen Zechuan as if taking aim. He said deliberately, "Shen Zechuan."

Shen Zechuan shot forward, nearly grazing the edge of Hassen's blade as Frostfall danced sideways to allow its master to slash the head off an onrushing horseman.

Hassen was instantly reminded of Xiao Chiye, who had sent Achi's severed head back with Bayim. It was an act of humiliation, the same as when he had taken away Xiao Fangxu's head.

Both sides had everything at stake tonight. Steel blades crashed against each other. The Biansha Horsemen shoved the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry back, and the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry stubbornly returned the favor. The hooves of their horses wove in and out through the mud, and men on both sides tumbled into the trench, turning it into a mire.

The garrison troops on the wall shoved the remaining rocks down, but for every horseman who was knocked off his mount, another rode forward to replace him. It was as if their numbers were endless, no matter how many they killed.

In the middle of the field, Shen Zechuan circled Hassen. Shen Zechuan was different from any opponent Hassen had encountered thus far. He kept his wits about him even in the face of such a relentless assault.

Perhaps he was not as strong as Hassen, but he made up for it with cunning. Hassen's blunt-force attacks felt like blades cutting through water, leaving him with an elusive sense of powerlessness—this was the thorniest enemy he had yet faced.

Hassen sheathed his scimitar and drew his pike dagger.

Oil poured down from the top of the city wall, and flames roared up in its wake. Hassen sprang into action, arresting Avalanche's next diagonal slash with his pike dagger. His battle steed surged forward, ramming Frostfall and its rider back toward the city gate with brute force.

Forward charge!

Shen Zechuan nearly dropped Avalanche. The hilt pressed against his ruined fingers so hard they contorted beneath the handkerchief. It didn't matter—Shen Zechuan couldn't feel them. He reversed his grip on the hilt and used his three good fingers to grasp it tighter, bracing the blunt edge of the blade against his forearm. Just as Yin Chang had done, he shoved the blade out with his elbow as he whirled and slashed it across Hassen's throat.

Hassen ducked the blow. Tightening his hold on his pike dagger, he struck at Shen Zechuan's chest. Shen Zechuan's palm slashed down and caught hold of Hassen's wrist—but he wasn't strong enough to stop him. In that split second between life and death, he shoved Hassen's wrist down so that the dagger merely pierced the side of his waist and not his heart.

"Your Lordship!" Tantai Hu, watching this unfold from the top of the wall, was so frightened his soul nearly fled his body.

Satisfied with having drawn blood, Hassen attempted to pull the dagger from Shen Zechuan's side, only to find that the fingers around his wrist were like an iron shackle.

Shen Zechuan's eyes were cold. He called out, "Push!"

The seemingly disorganized Embroidered Uniform Cavalry instantly formed up behind him, swarming toward Hassen's squad.

We've been had!

Hassen finally shook off Shen Zechuan's hold and pulled out his pike dagger, but the cavalry's battle steeds were already upon him. His entire force was slammed back, the horses in the rear sliding backward into the

trench. The mounted crossbow atop the wall was already cocked—but this still wasn't enough.

Shen Zechuan barked, "Again!"

Nearly all the plank bridges over the trench were broken. Men and horses splashed into the water, and the rain of fire from the top of the city wall was still pelting down. Hassen's assault had fallen apart. He reined his battle steed a few steps back—then dove out of the saddle, taking Shen Zechuan to the ground with him.

Shen Zechuan splashed into the mud. He immediately rolled and leapt back to put distance between himself and Hassen, not even pausing to swipe the muck out of his eyes. He was filthy from head to toe; it was impossible to tell where he was bleeding. His blood melted into the layers of mud and water, masked under the surging beats of hooves.

Hassen knew how to seize his opportunities. Within the few blows he had traded with Shen Zechuan earlier, he had seen through his enemy—this man's stamina was exhausted. He was no longer any true match for Hassen. Hassen lunged, taking advantage of the sprays of muddy water obscuring Shen Zechuan's vision to bring his dagger down.

Shen Zechuan deflected with his blade, but the force of Hassen's strike knocked him back half a step. Before Hassen could regain his balance, Shen Zechuan swiped his foot out and knocked Hassen off his feet. Hassen caught himself with a hand on the ground and immediately sprang back up. The pike dagger twirled between his fingers with unusual dexterity. Shen Zechuan stepped out of its path, and Avalanche and the pike dagger met again in a chorus of clangs.

Thinking quickly, Tantai Hu raised his hands and bellowed, "Flame attack to cover His Lordship!"

Braving the boulders from the cannons, the garrison troops at the top of the wall drew their bows. As expected, Hassen jumped a few steps back. By the time he got a clear look at the wall, he knew he had fallen for the ruse—the Duanzhou defense was out of oil. But the distraction cost him. He felt a sudden weight on his chest as Shen Zechuan's foot connected with his sternum. Hassen grabbed hold of Shen Zechuan's ankle, and the two tumbled back into the muck together.

Mud splashed into the air. The handkerchief around Shen Zechuan's hand loosened, and the three fingers he could still feel lost their grip on Avalanche. The blade clattered to the ground. Shen Zechuan, on his knees in the dirt, doubled over and coughed blood. He tried to rise but failed.

Hassen jumped nimbly to his feet. Before Shen Zechuan could recover his blade, he grabbed Shen Zechuan's ankle and hauled him back. Shen Zechuan's finger scrabbled through the mud and came up empty. He resolutely abandoned Avalanche. One hand pressed to the wound on his waist, he flipped back upright, relying on the sheer strength of his muscles.

These last few stunts were going to be the death of him.

Gasping for breath, Shen Zechuan slammed his elbow into Hassen's nose. Ji-Style Boxing was fierce and hard-hitting. Hassen reeled back and lost his grip on Shen Zechuan's ankle. But he reacted quickly—the pike dagger slipped from his right hand to his left, thrusting toward Shen Zechuan's throat.

Unable to block with one hand, Shen Zechuan clamped down on Hassen's left wrist with both forearms and leaned back as far as his spine would take him. The pike dagger stopped within a hair's breadth of his throat. Blood seeped between Shen Zechuan's teeth. Mouth filled with the taste of copper, he twisted Hassen's left arm between his own, forcing Hassen to pitch forward as Shen Zechuan raised his knee and slammed it into his enemy's chest.

Hassen dropped to the ground.

Shen Zechuan turned his head and spat blood. When Hassen raised his head from the mud, Shen Zechuan smashed his fist into it, knocking his head sideways. Hassen turned his face away and grabbed Shen Zechuan's forearm. When Shen Zechuan attempted to yank his arm back, Hassen rolled and flung him into the mud once again.

The instant Shen Zechuan hit the ground, he could feel that his right shoulder was dislocated. He reached up and gripped Hassen's collar, then called out, "Tantai Hu!"

Tantai Hu roared, "Release!"

Sparks flew as the long bolt shot from the mounted crossbow. It hurtled toward Hassen, taking with it a trail of fierce wind. Hassen grabbed

Shen Zechuan with one arm and rolled backward into the trench. The giant bolt crashed into the water, stirring up a tempest of waves.

Shen Zechuan swallowed mouthfuls of filthy water, choking until his head was spinning. Through it all, Hassen never released his grip; he dragged Shen Zechuan the whole way until he scrambled onto dry land on the other side of the trench.

"Your head." Hassen drew the scimitar at his waist once again. "I will gift it to Xiao Chiye."

Turning aside, Shen Zechuan spat out muddy sediment. He heaved an unsteady breath and laughed out loud. His expressive eyes narrowed, appearing especially wicked as he said, "The wind is rising."

Hassen's scimitar arced overhead. Shen Zechuan raised a leg and stomped hard on Hassen's chest, pulling a dagger from a thigh sheath with his left hand as he did. He caught Hassen's scimitar on the guard and twisted, trapping the blade.

Stuck, Hassen pulled on his scimitar's hilt. But Shen Zechuan was balanced on both feet now. Keeping the scimitar in the grip of his dagger, Shen Zechuan struck him in the face again. Hassen staggered backward. Mimicking Shen Zechuan's earlier move, he crouched low and swept a leg out.

But Shen Zechuan didn't fall.

Hassen pushed off the ground to rise, looking for his opponent. At that moment, there came a sound as if the gale above them had been torn asunder. Amid the rumble of thunder, a sharp arrow dodged the raindrops and drove deep into the ground beside Hassen.

Rain pelted the Conqueror Bow. The rumble in their ears wasn't from the storm; it was the thunder of hooves. The heavy cavalry pounded over the ground, blowing the rainwater into mist as they charged, like an unstoppable beast roaring out of the pitch-dark night. Snowcrest burst through the curtain of rain, and Xiao Chiye, awash in blood, descended upon the battlefield like a bolt of black lightning.

Like a wave of hard frost sweeping through the land—

The wolf was here.

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Chapter 251:
Victory

HASSEN STOOD UP. The ground quaked beneath his feet. Turning, he saw a line of thunderclouds billowing toward him.

The torrential rain washed over the armored cavalry and mixed with the mud splattered against the horses' hooves. As the pack of wolves howled and dashed across the battlefield, their enemies felt a familiar sense of danger, like a blade pressed to their throats. This was the sharp edge of the Libei Armored Cavalry.

The moment Xiao Chiye appeared on the battlefield in Zhongbo, Hassen's assault had failed. He hadn't managed to storm Duanzhou, and had lost a brave general and his elite squad to the attempt. Staying any longer would be a pointless waste of lives. He ought to withdraw his soldiers at once.

Hassen's vanguard at the city gate had already turned their horses east, while the messengers behind the trench brandished the eagle banners as they ran. The snaking line of the Libei Armored Cavalry wound across the southeast. The Scorpions began to haul their siege weapons toward the Chashi River in retreat.

The city gates opened wide. Tantai Hu led the Duanzhou garrison troops, who had been fighting cautiously for two days, out in a charge, his blade held high. At the top of his lungs, he shouted, "Er-ye is here!"

Scimitar in hand, Hassen jumped onto a riderless horse. He issued a series of rapid commands in the Biansha tongue, ordering his elite force to split into two and bring up the rear. They were to act as shields and obstruct the Embroidered Uniform Cavalry and Libei Armored Cavalry in the west and southeast, buying time for the supply squad in the center to withdraw with their weapons.

"Your Lordship!" Huo Lingyun gripped his horse's reins in one hand and held Frostfall's reins in the other as he spurred his mount over to Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan fished Avalanche out of the mud with his left hand. He didn't mount Frostfall, but watched as Hassen led his people southward to confront Xiao Chiye.

"Get ready," he said.

Huo Lingyun reacted quickly. Sitting upright on his saddle, he raised an arm and shouted toward the wall, *"Ready!"*

Hassen's swift figure was about to disappear into the heavy storm, but his red hair was far too conspicuous, like a glowing beacon in the rain. Shen Zechuan's eyes followed him as if tracking a fleeing rabbit. Hassen seemed to sense something amid those flying raindrops. He whipped his head back in time to see Shen Zechuan gesturing toward the wall through the violent sheets of rain.

The mounted crossbow at the top of the city wall released its second bolt. The massive arrow resembled an ox cart rampaging through the air. It streaked across the battlefield in the blink of an eye, cutting through the torrents of splattering rain. Hassen dove out of the saddle. The instant he hit the ground, the massive bolt crashed into the squad of elite cavalry. The riders were knocked into the mud, their mounts unable to dodge at all. All those who were struck died on the spot.

Horses screamed and fell over into the muck. Sprays of blood soaked every man. The squadron fell apart within moments. The mounted crossbow struck terror in the hearts of the Biansha Horsemen; its awful destructive power was more than any of them could withstand. Each time it appeared on the battlefield, it would reap countless lives.

Before they could recover, the armored cavalry was upon them.

Hassen crawled to his feet and swung his scimitar aloft to block Xiao Chiye's Wolfsfang. But Xiao Chiye was not Shen Zechuan. Hassen's scimitar held steady for only a split second before Xiao Chiye slammed it down, nearly ripping it from his hand.

What terrifying strength!

Hassen's entire body sank along with his weapon. He steadied his blade with both hands and bellowed as he attempted to lift it out from under Wolfsfang.

Xiao Chiye wore no helmet. Rainwater trickled along his temples and filthy blood, too fresh to be scoured clean by the rain, slid across his brow. He slowly dragged Wolfsfang back, reeling Hassen closer, and looked down on Hassen with a spine-chilling smile.

"I was looking for you."

The rain drummed around them. Dark clouds blotted out the sky and the horizon, threatening to collapse onto the battlefield. Thunder crashed so close overhead it rattled their teeth. In the darkness, Hassen saw the fangs of the wolf.

He slammed his scimitar sideways, freeing it from Wolfsfang.

The instant Hassen leapt back, Snowcrest's front hooves stomped into the footprints he had left behind, sending up a wave of filth. All around them, the Biansha Horsemen and the Libei Armored Cavalry clashed. The armored cavalry was a blade newly forged from the fresh blood in Bianjun, and was now so sharp their attack looked like a roaring mouth with a thousand teeth.

Hassen ran back a few steps and swung up onto his horse once again. He was scarcely seated before Wolfsfang was swinging toward his face in another attack. His horse skittered backward, and Xiao Chiye shadowed him at every step, like a man revitalized.

Tantai Hu waded into the cadre of horsemen who were attempting to withdraw. Swinging his blade, he first hacked off the ponies' legs, then led his men after the Scorpions who were moving the siege engines. He bared his teeth in a fiendish smile. "Motherfuckers! Time to pay with your lives, Baldies!"

Duanzhou had finally begun to turn the tide. The Embroidered Uniform Cavalry raced across the trench, herding the Biansha Horsemen eastward. The armored cavalry near the banks of the Chashi River sped north to sever the horsemen's route of retreat. Alongside the garrison troops and Embroidered Uniform Cavalry, they executed a three-pronged attack that forced the Biansha Horsemen into the open plain east of Duanzhou.

The only route still left to them was northwest, but Hassen hesitated to order a retreat that way—it would bring them too close to Third Sand Camp. He worried this was a deliberate trap from Xiao Chiye, and that Lu

Guangbai was lying in wait to ambush them in the north. He was already besieged on all sides; he dared not risk another dead end.

As Wolfsfang cleaved toward his throat, Hassen nimbly bent back to dodge the blow. Parrying the blade, he commanded in the Biansha tongue, "Scorpions forward!"

The elite forces meeting the Libei Armored Cavalry's attack instantly fell back. Seizing their chance, the Scorpions took their place at the front and formed a line in the southeast. They spurred their ponies onward and swung their hammers high.

Xiao Chiye raised Wolfsfang before him. The flat of the blade caught the drumming raindrops as he leveled his weapon in midair, like the final chain holding the Armored Cavalry at bay. Xiao Chiye didn't move; behind him, the armored cavalry fell still.

"Charge!" Hassen commanded.

The hooves of the Scorpions' ponies kicked up a sea of mud as they galloped. Ignoring the mix of filth and rainwater that splattered their faces, they cried out in the Biansha tongue.

Xiao Chiye slashed his arm down.

The garrison troops watching from the battlements could scarcely believe their eyes. The scraping sound of the armored cavalry returning their blades to their sheaths carried all the way up to the wall—they were sheathing their blades at a time like this?

Standing at the very front, Xiao Chiye drew his new long saber. It was as if the armored cavalry had flung off an iron mask; the scrape of metal against sheaths rang out as the same long sabers were revealed on the flanks of every horse. These long blades hadn't tasted blood back at the Bianjun Commandery; they had only ever flashed their edges at the Chashi Sinkhole. Now, in the soaking rain, it was still only rainwater that dripped off their gleaming points.

The Scorpions' iron hammers swung, and the ranks of the Libei Armored Cavalry parted, sweeping to either side to allow the Scorpions to charge forward unimpeded. The Scorpions were midway through the ranks when Hassen was overcome with foreboding. Yet it was too late to order a withdrawal—the armored cavalry on both sides had started to close back in.

Xiao Chiye, at the very front, brushed past the Scorpions. Thunder crashed furiously overhead, and the roar of rain intensified. The Scorpions' hammers hadn't so much as touched a Libei soldier's armor before Libei's sabers were slashing off their heads.

The Libei Armored Cavalry in the southeast field was like an iron cage, swallowing up the Scorpions and drawing them deeper into the trap. Then, using their long sabers, they exterminated their prisoners, just as Xiao Chiye had.

The armored cavalry flashed their blades as one; that strike of lightning was followed by the thunderous sound of a hundred heads rolling.

"Break out toward the east!" Hassen commanded.

He could afford to fight no longer. Whatever advantages the Biansha Horsemen held at the start had now entirely vanished. All that awaited the Scorpions once they charged into the armored cavalry's encirclement was slaughter. Hassen had risked a surprise attack on Duanzhou, but he had already lost too much here. He had to cut his losses and break through Libei's lines to cross the river as soon as possible.

The Scorpions in the rear abandoned the fight. They mounted their ponies and harried the infantry hauling the weapons as the army fled eastward.

Hassen galloped forward in the rain. Icy water lashed his cheeks. His gaze was fixed straight ahead, carving a bloody path out as fast as his pony would carry him. The sound of hooves echoed beside him—Snowcrest was pacing him, in hot pursuit. Hassen's scimitar chipped from parrying blow after blow. Xiao Chiye galloped faster and faster. The two men raced each other, like cannonballs sailing through the curtain of rain.

The barren land on the banks of the Chashi River was within sight as Hassen reached the edge of the encirclement. The Biansha Horsemen who had begun to ford the river were engaged in an intense battle with Xiao Chiye's Imperial Army, which he had sent to lie in ambush; the shallows here were already an expanse of red.

Hassen galloped straight into the river. Snowcrest followed him in. The horse slammed against the neck of Hassen's steed, knocking his mount askew. Hassen yanked at the reins, and Xiao Chiye swung his saber and

slashed through them. Without Hassen guiding it, his horse couldn't right itself. It tumbled into the shallows, bringing Hassen down with it.

The moment he splashed into the water, Hassen rolled. He had lost his pike dagger at the edge of the trench when he fought Shen Zechuan; all he had now were his scimitar and a smaller dagger on his belt. The sound of slaughter around him was deafening. He scooped up river water and wiped his eyes clean of the filth and blood obscuring them.

Xiao Chiye landed too, his towering body blocking Hassen's eastward gaze like a mountain standing between Hassen and the desert. Hassen raised his chipped scimitar before his chest and steadied his breathing. The instant Xiao Chiye sprang toward him, he lunged as well.

Metal struck metal, sharp and grating.

Xiao Chiye bore down on Hassen's scimitar, forcing him back. With difficulty, Hassen stabilized himself. Rainwater ran down his blade as he danced backward, out of Wolfsfang's way.

River water splashed up with every step.

Blood still stained Xiao Chiye's cheeks. His aggressive fighting style was that of a man who held nothing back, revealing an insatiable desire for victory. Numbness tingled up Hassen's arms with every one of his strikes. Under the continued assault from Wolfsfang, his scimitar was being shaved away into scrap metal.

Hassen buckled under Xiao Chiye's next hack. He caught himself with his arms just before he could collapse into the water; crouched low, he lifted his blade to block another blow.

Xiao Chiye's posture barely changed as he pressed down on him with all his might. Under such oppressive force, Hassen's scimitar slowly sank back until it was flush against his shoulder. He could feel Wolfsfang's sharpness. A ragged gasp escaped his throat. Pain shot through his legs as he pushed futilely upward; his knees were beginning to give.

Hassen would never kneel to Xiao Chiye.

Untold numbers had starved to death when the Twelve Tribes knelt before the Zhou empire. Hassen had come this far to find a different path forward. Hassen loved Lake Chiti, yet he slept among blades for years at a

time. He had never once bowed to the armored cavalry. He was the heroic eagle soaring across the blue dome of heaven.

Hassen fought with all his might against Xiao Chiye. He bellowed and mustered the strength to push Wolfsfang up. Brazenly, he lunged forward and very nearly cut Xiao Chiye's throat.

Xiao Chiye took a quick step back and shoved his elbow out to knock away Hassen's scimitar; the horse beside Hassen screamed and collapsed, bleeding, as the blade cut into it instead. Hassen flipped his dagger from his belt and charged forward again before Xiao Chiye could attack. Unable to bring Wolfsfang up in time, Xiao Chiye released the hilt and blocked the dagger with his right armguard. Balling his left hand into a fist, he knocked Hassen into the Chashi River.

A spray of water exploded from Hassen's fall. Coughing, he dove forward and caught Xiao Chiye around the waist, hooking his leg around Xiao Chiye's ankle and knocking him into the water. As the water crashed around them, Xiao Chiye twisted out of his grip and managed to grab the back of Hassen's collar, locking him in a chokehold from behind.

Hassen gasped for breath. He thrust his dagger behind him blindly but struck only heavy armor. He gave up and jabbed the dagger over his shoulder toward Xiao Chiye's eyes without much confidence. Xiao Chiye finally released him to evade the blow. Hassen turned and wrapped his hands around Xiao Chiye's arm, then twisted his hips and flung Xiao Chiye over his shoulder.

He planted a hand over Xiao Chiye's face and held it under the fast-flowing river. Gripping his dagger, he readied himself to cut off Xiao Chiye's head—but just before he could strike, his enemy reached out and grabbed the blade in his bare hand. As the edge sank into his flesh, he surged out of the water and struck Hassen's jaw with all his might.

Hassen's eyes watered from the impact. In that split second of vulnerability, Xiao Chiye's elbow rammed into his chest. Blood spurted from Hassen's mouth before he could swallow it down. Xiao Chiye released the dagger's blade. Clenching his bleeding hand into a fist, he once again slammed Hassen into the water.

This final blow was brutal.

Blood gushed from Hassen's nose and mouth. Stars danced before his eyes. The clamor of combat was at once right beside him and very far away. The downpour blurred the surface of the river under him. As he braced himself in the shallows, he realized his leather sleeve had split, and the Chiti flower in his pocket was drifting away with the water. The blossom slipped through Hassen's grasping fingers and, in the blink of an eye, was reduced to a pulp by trampling hooves.

Xiao Chiye raised Wolfsfang again. His eyes were wet. Hassen had seen a wolf like this before. On that snowy night not long ago, Xiao Chiye had hunted him for dozens of miles with exactly this look in his eyes.

Along the banks of the Chashi River, the Libei Armored Cavalry rode down the horsemen, leaving them nowhere to flee. The river ran scarlet, and floating corpses piled up in the shallows. The rain soaked everyone's faces until they were pale.

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The reinforcements Hassen had left in Gedal had never arrived.

Hassen gasped for breath. He raised his head against the heavy rain. He couldn't see over Xiao Chiye's shoulder, couldn't see the eastern bank of the Chashi River. Dejected, he murmured under his breath, "May the gods bless—"

Wolfsfang slammed down through the silt of the shallows. The blood flowing along the blade turned to ribbons in the water. Hassen crumpled to his knees in the rapid currents before sinking down into the river.

Xiao Chiye's chest heaved as the rainstorm washed over his shoulders. The clamor of hooves behind him fell still. Between the boundless expanse of the sky and the dark earth, the armored cavalry had all turned to watch him. Xiao Chiye faced the Chashi River and raised his arm, red hair tangled in his fingers.

The long silence was broken only by the rush of the rapids at his feet. Tantai Hu waded two steps into the water, then tossed his blade down and cried, "We won!"

"We…" Gasps and sobs burst from the armored cavalry's throats and swelled into earth-shaking roars. *"We are wolves!"*

The dark shadows that had hung over them for the past six months had cleared at last. The blood of countless men flowed into the Chashi River, running north to south. In this torrential storm, Libei had reclaimed its dignity.

Xiao Chiye clenched his fists, his eyes red at the rims, and said nothing.

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Chapter 252:
Lizard of the Frontier

THE RAIN SUBSIDED, and Xiao Chiye withdrew to Duanzhou. The garrison troops started the heavy work of cleaning up the battlefield. The water in the trench had overflowed in the rain and turned the path before the gate into a soggy mess. The horses walking past were covered in mud to the knee, and their riders were no better off.

Shen Zechuan stood before the city gate and watched Snowcrest canter closer. Xiao Chiye leaned out of the saddle as he approached. Shen Zechuan raised his right arm, and Xiao Chiye gently bumped his own against it. Xiao Chiye gazed at Shen Zechuan and extended his fingers to lift Shen Zechuan's chin. There in the middle of the downpour, he lowered his eyes and pressed their foreheads together.

The rain enveloped the two men in its embrace.

Shen Zechuan closed his eyes. Rainwater trickled along his lashes and dripped onto the bridge of Xiao Chiye's nose. He slowly smiled, then laughed out loud.

Qiao Tianya began to urge his horse over. But after only a few steps, he pulled back on the reins and turned to Ji Gang. "Where is Shifu going?"

Ji Gang stood at the entrance of the gateway tunnel for a time, looking through the curtain of rain, before tossing the overcoat he was holding to Qiao Tianya.

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Qiao Tianya draped the overcoat over himself. “Shifu, the name of the Ji Clan and its boxing style will once again spread far and wide after this battle. Your old man can rest in peace.”

Ji Gang looked up at the sky, letting the rainwater splash into his eyes. “Duanzhou will have a bountiful harvest this year.”

Qiao Tianya smiled.

Clasping his hands behind his back, Ji Gang turned and heaved a long sigh. He didn’t glance at Shen Zechuan again as he called, “Hurry and get the physicians!”

The rain didn’t stop until shortly after dawn. The bamboo tubes in the courtyard pond tapped incessantly against the mossy rocks. Wrapped in a short, lined jacket, Ding Tao stood guard with Li Xiong on the veranda and watched as the physicians streamed in and out.

“I’m thirsty,” Li Xiong said.

Clutching his book, Ding Tao whispered, “Then go pour yourself some water. I have to stand guard here.”

Li Xiong looked reluctant. He lingered, his large figure blocking the walkway, and shook his head vigorously. He didn’t want to go alone.

Inside, Kong Ling lifted the hanging screen and led a physician out with a grave expression. Fei Sheng, having only just woken, was freshly arrived for duty. Seeing Kong Ling emerge, he immediately stepped forward to greet him and ordered his subordinate to conduct the physician to the side hall. He asked Kong Ling, “Mister, how is our master?”

Kong Ling shook his head and turned back toward the main room with him, whispering, “Don’t disturb His Lordship when you go in. Er-ye is on tenterhooks. He’s been awake by his bedside all night.”

Fei Sheng didn’t dare say a word more as he followed Kong Ling inside, where he saw the bamboo blinds had been lowered at the entrance to the inner chamber. Xiao Chiye, shed of his armor, was reading the physician’s prescription. The physician who remained behind stood primly across from the second master and bowed as he said gently, “I’m afraid it’ll prove difficult for him to hold a blade again. Those two fingers…”

Fei Sheng was overcome with foreboding when he heard those words. His heart sank as he looked at Xiao Chiye's grave expression, so forbidding that those waiting in attendance along the wall were as silent as cicadas in winter.

"The wound in his side…and his lower leg…"

And the right arm Hassen had almost torn off at the shoulder.

Shen Zechuan had looked fine when he first returned the day before. It was only when he washed his face clean of the blood and grime that they realized how ghastly his complexion was. The two fingers on his right hand had already been numb and swollen from battle, and then he had fallen into the trench during his fight with Hassen, where he had further aggravated his injuries grappling in the filthy water. By the end, he had relied on his left hand to collect Avalanche from the battlefield—his right hand was utterly paralyzed. He hadn't returned to the city on horseback. Instead, he'd put on a carefree act, even though the dagger wound in his side had torn open when he forced himself up after Hassen stabbed him. Getting on Frostfall's back had been beyond him; it had taken all his willpower to push through the pain and pretend everything was well while letting Huo Lingyun lead his horse. Even worse, the instant Shen Zechuan's tightly wound nerves had relaxed, the aftereffects of exposure to the frigid rain had crashed down on him. He thought he'd fallen asleep, but in fact, he was halfway comatose. A fever had come raging over him in the night, which even now had yet to subside. Everything he ate he vomited back up; his stomach had been stuffed with hard steamed buns, and after puking them all out, he vomited bile.

The lowered bed curtains admitted no light. Xiao Chiye waited for the last physician to leave before lifting them and peering at Shen Zechuan through the gap.

His loose hair fanned out over the bedding. Unable to curl up, he lay gingerly on his uninjured side, revealing a sliver of his side profile. The upturned corner of his eye possessed none of its usual seductive allure. He looked as if he were merely sleeping. Xiao Chiye touched the corner of his eye, but he didn't stir. Shen Zechuan only dared be so unguarded when Xiao Chiye was by his side. He looked very small like this, completely enveloped by Xiao Chiye's larger figure.

Xiao Chiye could hardly draw breath. Everything in his chest hurt. He leaned over and kissed Lanzhou's temple. Even the movement of his fingertips was ever so light, as if caressing a baby fox cub yet to shed its winter down.

The physicians in the courtyard came and went. They fed the prefectural governor another bowl of medicine, which he threw up again by midmorning. Seeing that the medicine was having no effect, Ji Gang brought yet more physicians over to give their opinions. The side hall was crammed full of people. The joy of having survived a calamity still animated the city, but already the governor's manor was shrouded in gloom.

Midway through the afternoon, reports from the front lines arrived. They were stacked together with military reports from Bianjun, all of them needing Xiao Chiye's urgent attention. But Xiao Chiye didn't dare leave Shen Zechuan's side. He had everything sent to the side hall, where he stood and drank a cup of water while he read the military reports and listened to the physicians explain their treatment plans.

Ding Tao didn't dare stir up any trouble now. Leading Li Xiong by the sleeve, he said, "There's a water jar over there. I'll pour you a cup."

Li Xiong didn't move. He rubbed his nose and nodded unhappily. Confused, Ding Tao asked, "Why aren't you moving?"

Li Xiong didn't make a sound. He turned as someone entered through the moon gate—Fei Sheng was leading a newly arrived physician inside. They passed through the walkway in the blink of an eye and, with a lift of the hanging screen, disappeared into the room. Kong Ling and the other gentlemen were also inside, keeping watch in the outer chamber.

This newest physician had pleasant features and spoke with a distinct Fanzhou accent. "To think His Lordship was caught in the rain with his health like this. The way he's vomiting, he certainly won't be able to keep any medicine down." He shook his sleeves back to his elbows, gesturing for his apprentice to open his medical chest, and took out a bundle of acupuncture needles and showed them to Gao Zhongxiong. "I'll try these."

Kong Ling rose to his feet. "There's no hurry. Let's wait for Er-ye before making a decision."

The physician spread his hands. “Saving a life is like putting out a fire. It cannot be delayed. How about this? You gentlemen send someone to hurry the second master along. I’ll get everything ready.”

Gao Zhongxiong eagerly voiced his agreement and made his way out. But when he reached the door, he found Li Xiong blocking the way.

The physician turned his back to them and lifted the drape to walk into the inner chamber, instructing his apprentice, “Bring the chest in—”

Fei Sheng sensed something off the instant the apprentice grabbed the needles. He grasped the hilt of his blade. “Hold it!”

But the apprentice had already flicked his wrist, and from inside the bundle there was a flash of cold metal. Fei Sheng could dodge those needles, but the advisors couldn’t. His blade sprang from its sheath—with a series of clinks, the concealed weapons struck the sword as he shouldered Kong Ling aside.

The table and chairs in the outer room overturned with a crash. Kong Ling fell backward onto the rug. He flung out a hand and shouted, “Men! Come quick!”

The physician dove into the inner room. The blinds swished down behind him, blocking everyone’s line of sight. Fei Sheng’s neck prickled with cold sweat. Before he could take more than a step, the apprentice swung a chair and blocked him.

Shit!

“Protect His Lordship!” Fei Sheng cried.

It was too late for the guards on the walkway to break through the windows. Gao Zhongxiong was knocked to the ground as Li Xiong charged past, bellowing as he lunged at the physician and pinned him to the ground. The two crashed into the footrest at the side of the bed, sending the lowered curtains fluttering. The steel needles between the physician’s fingers plunged toward Li Xiong’s eyes. Li Xiong grabbed hold of the physician’s hand and smashed his head into his adversary’s, then slammed the man’s hand onto the ground.

The physician’s vision swam from the impact. He wrapped his arms around Li Xiong’s neck and twisted, putting Li Xiong’s throat in a lock. The

two rolled across the ground and crashed into the low table nearby. A teapot fell and shattered, splashing scalding tea across Li Xiong's face. Gasping hard, Li Xiong swung a fist behind him but struck empty air.

The physician pressed Li Xiong's face down into the shards of broken porcelain. Face streaked with blood, Li Xiong shouted, "Lizard! Lizard!"

The physician raised his needle.

A sudden weight crashed over the man's back, and his body was flung aside. Covering half of his face in pain, he shouted something in the Biansha tongue and frantically felt on the floor for the needle he'd dropped. Xiao Chiye hauled him up by the back of his collar and slammed his face against the ground.

There were a few muffled thuds, then silence.

Outside, the guards had wrestled the apprentice to the floor. Fei Sheng hadn't even caught his breath yet when the bamboo blind swung wildly, and the physician, face covered in blood, rolled onto the rug in the outer room. He was no longer breathing.

Xiao Chiye's expression was frigid. Barely suppressing his fury, he said in a frosty tone, "I want this place sealed airtight with a guard every ten steps. Who was in charge of screening? Get out of my sight. Don't make me repeat myself!"

Everyone, inside and out, fell to their knees.

To think an entire manor of guards had let the enemy march right up to Shen Zechuan's bedside. Fei Sheng's back was drenched. He kowtowed, head pressed against the ground, and didn't dare make a sound.

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Chapter 253:
Frigid Illness

BY MORNING, the atmosphere in the city of Duanzhou had undergone an abrupt change. Soldiers filled the streets and alleys, with the garrison troops and the Imperial Army taking turns to patrol. The four gates of the city remained tightly shut. Everywhere, the click of boots and the clank of blades filled the air. The mood in the governor's manor was even heavier. Every guard was on high alert, scarcely daring to blink.

Inside the hall, Xiao Chiye squatted before Li Xiong. "You know him?"

Another physician applied ointment to Li Xiong's injured face as he answered, "Yeah. He's a Lizard. They drink Gedal's milk. Very stinky."

Xiao Chiye frowned. "Not a Scorpion?"

"Used to—used to be a Scorpion." Li Xiong spoke in such a hurry he stumbled over his words. "But later he became a Lizard."

Ding Tao couldn't make heads or tails of it. "What do you mean later?"

"They are Lizards." Li Xiong patted his own arm where Lei Jingzhe's scorpion tattoo had been. "My dage spoke to them before. They are not the same as Ha, Hae…" He couldn't remember Haerigu's name. "Not the same as Hae. They're not livestock."

In the eyes of the Twelve Tribes, Scorpions were animals penned in Gedal, the lowest of the low.

Xiao Chiye had heard about the tattoo on Joril's corpse. It seemed he'd been a Lizard too—but Joril had clear Biansha characteristics. Perhaps a Lizard was still a Scorpion, under a slightly different name.

"Lizards." Xiao Chiye lifted his eyes to regard Li Xiong and guessed, "Lizards are Amur's own Scorpions. That's why they have a higher status than Achi and Haerigu."

Li Xiong gave him a thumbs-up. “Right! They have their own land, where they can ride horses.” He grew sulky again. “They are very bad people who like to beat others up. They don’t play with the Scorpions. They think they’re worth more than Scorpions.”

Xiao Chiye pressed a finger against his thumb ring and spun it gently.

Hassen had barely been dead three days and already Amur’s Lizards had appeared in the courtyard. Had Joril brought them here? Or had they been in the city all along?

“You did well.” Xiao Chiye patted Li Xiong’s head. “Keep watch over His Lordship here, and I’ll give you sweets.”

“You’ve always been meticulous when it comes to these things.” Qiao Tianya’s hair was still wet when he met Fei Sheng at the prison. “How could you make such an oversight?”

Fei Sheng, who was scrutinizing the corpse, shook his head. “The assassin looked like a man of the Zhou empire, and he spoke the local dialect even more smoothly than you and me. He even had proof of household registration.”

Qiao Tianya turned the corpse over to examine it.

Shen Zechuan had established the Zhongbo census register just last year. Every household’s records and family history could be traced and checked. If these assassins had household registrations, they had likely lain in wait in Zhongbo for longer than Shen Zechuan had been here.

“That makes it troublesome,” Qiao Tianya said in a low voice. “There’s no way to identify them if they hide among the people.”

“If you want a tell, there’s only one.” Fei Sheng pointed. “The tattoo.”

Qiao Tianya looked where Fei Sheng indicated and nudged the corpse. Sure enough, a lizard tattoo was inked on his arm.

“Before, when we were investigating the Scorpions, Master had all the prefectural yamen note down the name of anyone with a tattoo.” Fei Sheng folded his arms. “I’ve already sent a letter to Yu Xiaozai in Dunzhou.

If there are no records of these two men's names, they must've snuck in during Hassen's attack."

Qiao Tianya nodded and drew his hand back. When he looked at Fei Sheng, his expression was grim. "Have you thought about why they'd have such conspicuous marks despite being assassins?"

Both of them had come up through the Embroidered Uniform Guard. They knew well the necessity of disguise and camouflage. Scorpions had tattoos that marked them as outcasts from the other tribes—but what need was there for the Lizards, who were of higher status than the Scorpions, to have them?

The expression in Fei Sheng's eyes was grave. He clicked his tongue in dissatisfaction.

Shen Zechuan woke in the middle of the afternoon. Xiao Chiye fed him medicine. The fever had turned Shen Zechuan's head muzzy. He could hear Xiao Chiye's voice, but it seemed to drift in and out.

"Lanzhou…" Xiao Chiye was saying something as he brushed hair off Shen Zechuan's cheek.

Shen Zechuan gasped shallowly, as if he couldn't catch his breath. He opened his mouth for the spoon and swallowed the last of the medicine. Xiao Chiye wiped away his sweat with a wet handkerchief. Shen Zechuan tilted his head, and the tip of his nose brushed Xiao Chiye's bandaged palm. His lips opened and closed.

Xiao Chiye lowered his head to listen.

"Handkerchief." Shen Zechuan's words came haltingly. "Mine."

"It's with me." Xiao Chiye covered Shen Zechuan's sweat-soaked hand with his own. "Once you recover, I'll give it back to you."

Shen Zechuan was so ill he was barely conscious. He whimpered indistinctly in pain.

Xiao Chiye leaned down, almost lying beside the pillow, and coaxed him. "Really. I'll give it to you."

Shen Zechuan didn't believe him. He frowned, as if struggling to speak again. His half-lidded eyes betrayed his upset as he buried his face in Xiao Chiye's palm. Xiao Chiye felt like Shen Zechuan was crushing his heart until nothing was left but bruises. He lowered his head and pressed his brow against Shen Zechuan's temple, against his sweat.

The bitter taste of herbs saturated Shen Zechuan's mouth. Beneath his heavy eyelids swam a mosaic of bizarre, surreal scenes. Only the cloak of Xiao Chiye's scent made him feel safe; beside him, he floated gently amid waves of windswept grass. In a tiny voice, he called, "Xiao Er."

Xiao Chiye kissed him and breathed, "Mm."

Shen Zechuan grimaced several times, then said, voice cracking, "I want…something sweet…"

Xiao Chiye's heart relaxed a fraction. He got up to prepare some honeyed water for him. Shen Zechuan only drank two spoonfuls, enough for the tip of his tongue to taste a little sweetness. Xiao Chiye rinsed the handkerchief again and wiped sweat from Shen Zechuan's neck. He could tell solely by touch that his fever had subsided a little.

In the side hall, the assembled advisors were fraught with anxiety. The suffocating stink of pipe smoke permeated the room, but no one made to get up even as the hour turned late. They had forgotten about their evening meals, too concerned about the prefectural governor.

"All these physicians are useless," Tantai Hu told Kong Ling. "Say, Mister, what if I ride out of the city and search again in Dunzhou?"

Gao Zhongxiong's face paled at the mere suggestion. He flapped his hands. "That won't do. The assassins today came with identities that could stand up to scrutiny. If there really are spies, no one will be able to catch them out!"

Kong Ling's frown deepened.

The entire room fell silent. Not long after, they heard the rain start up again outside. The guards braved the downpour and took shifts on duty. Lanterns burned through the night, throwing bright light on every path

within the residence and leaving no shadows for assassins to take advantage of.

No one had gotten much rest since the battle. By a few hours past midnight, those with weaker constitutions could no longer keep their eyes open. They slumped in their chairs, drifting between dozing and wakefulness. They didn't dare fall into a deep sleep and only snatched a few moments to close their eyes.

Yao Wenyu unwound his fur collar from around his neck when he entered the room. The creak of the wheelchair startled a number of advisors awake. He placed the collar on his lap and said mildly, "Er-ye is here, so His Lordship is certain to recover. I know the gentlemen are anxious, but now that the battle is over, the documents from the yamen of the other prefectures are piling up. It would be negligent to wait until His Lordship wakes to deal with them. Chengfeng and Shenwei can keep watch here. Everyone else can go back and get some rest. Tomorrow morning, handle business as usual. Act at your own discretion for small matters; for major affairs or things you are uncertain about, present them in the side hall, and we will come to a resolution together."

Kong Ling got to his feet and added, "His Lordship is very ill. It is indeed inadvisable for us to push him with work once he is well. Everyone, please head back."

The gentlemen all stood and agreed, then filed out one after the other.

Gao Zhongxiong poured tea for Yao Wenyu. "You're sensitive to the cold. You should've gotten someone to accompany you here."

Yao Wenyu took the tea with thanks. "I have my fur collar and cloak; I'm fine. It's been raining nonstop these last few days. I see the drainage of the public ditches in the city is going smoothly, though."

"It was taken care of at the beginning of the year." Tantai Hu roused himself and rubbed his eye adorned by the blade scar. "When everyone met here back then, they all feared melted snow would clog the ditches, so they went out of their way to dredge them."

"The ones in Dengzhou are clogged, but it's not a big issue. Lord Yu watched them getting dredged during his inspection tour," Gao Zhongxiong said. "There have been plenty of updates from Cizhou these past couple

days. Other than the letter in which His Excellency Zhou asked after His Lordship's health, there are also those discussing the Eight Cities."

The properties of the Pan clan had been confiscated, and the city of Dancheng missed the spring plowing. They were already in the sixth month. Once the autumn harvest came calling around the corner, the meals of the commoners of Dancheng would be a matter for worry.

"We are fighting a battle here, and so is Qudu," Kong Ling said. "I heard news that the Grand Secretariat has already instructed the Ministry of Rites to begin preparation for the coronation."

Han Cheng was dead, and while the empress dowager counted on her connection to Hua Xiangyi to preserve her life, she was imprisoned in the inner court harems. The authority to deploy the Eight Great Battalions of the Capital Command Troops had returned to the heir apparent's hands. Li Jianting had the Qidong Garrison Troops to act as surety too, so how could the noble clans, who couldn't even help themselves, stop her?

"We are besieged by an external foe on our border," Yao Wenyu said in a soft voice. "If everyone works as one to assist His Lordship, it's possible to defeat Biansha. But today's Qudu is torn apart by discord. Xue Yanqing's confiscation of the Pan Clan's properties has made the remaining seven cities restless. The heir's coronation will be a menacing shadow bearing down on us."

"Speaking of which," Kong Ling said with a glance at Chen Yang. "We still don't know what happened in the Bianjun Commandery. Was an agreement reached with the Youxiong tribe?"

Straightening the military reports in front of him, Chen Yang said, "If it had, Er-ye wouldn't have been late. Dalantai of the Youxiong tribe agreed to our terms and promised not to obstruct Marshal Qi's march north. At the same time, he accepted Hassen's gift behind our backs. He kept his word not to obstruct Marshal Qi's route to Gedal—but then he mounted a surprise attack on the Bianjun Commandery just as Er-ye was preparing to lead troops to Duanzhou."

Precisely as Qi Zhuyin had predicted, Dalantai didn't take anyone's side. He had no wish to submit to Amur, nor did he want to place himself at Shen Zechuan's disposal. He saw his opportunity in Hassen's and Shen Zechuan's competing bids for his cooperation: to pass through the Bianjun

Commandery and occupy Suotian Pass, which had not had a strong and capable general since the loss of Feng Yisheng.

The Youxiong tribe had always lived on the grasslands in the south. When Dalantai had roamed the desert near Gedal long ago, he'd understood then that there was no room for his people there. They'd endured an arduous journey, trekking across difficult terrain and across rivers, to return to a place near their homeland. And to return to their home for good, they were willing to dance on the edge of a blade.

It was on the yellow sands of the desert that Xiao Chiye's armored cavalry came face to face with the bear horses of legend.

The battle in the Bianjun Commandery lasted two days, and Dalantai had died in it. The Youxiong tribe seemed forever unable to cross over that final threshold; they could only, once again, retreat into the desert.

"We left Hassen's reinforcements in Gedal to Marshal Qi." Chen Yang waved the paper in his hand. "This is last night's urgent report. Marshal Qi learned on her return journey that Amur is moving troops."

At these words, the entire hall grew tense.

"Th-then," Gao Zhongxiong stammered, "we are going to f-fight again…"

Chen Yang made a soothing motion. "It seems to be just a transfer. After all, they just lost their commanding general on the front line. Amur has to appoint someone to take over for Hassen. I feel this person may very well be himself."

Because Xiao Chiye hadn't returned Hassen's head.

"We'll await Er-ye's instructions on the military arrangements," Tantai Hu reassured the gentlemen. "They'll have a hard time fighting their way to the city walls again. At the moment, we have the upper hand. Even if Amur does ride out personally, he might not necessarily be any stronger than Hassen. Besides, if he wants to cross the Chashi River, he'll have to go through Er-ye."

At that, the atmosphere in the side hall eased. Yet before they could turn to other topics, a commotion broke out on the walkway. Chen Yang lifted the hanging screen and poked his head out for a look.

Ding Tao was crying so hard a snot bubble emerged from his nose. Tugging at Chen Yang, he shouted, “Ge! Call the physicians, quick! His Lordship is burning up again!”

The physicians were trembling as they gathered on the veranda and discussed prescriptions in whispers. Rain tumbled down onto the orange jasmine in the courtyard, covering the ground with fallen blooms. Heedless of the rain, Qiao Tianya and Fei Sheng returned, stepping across the tattered white petals before swiftly wiping the water off their bodies under the eaves.

“The physicians who used to treat Yuanzhuo are all here.” Qiao Tianya threw the wet handkerchief back on the offered tray. “And all the physicians Ge Qingqing recruited from Juexi. Do none of them know their trade?”

“His fever keeps returning.” Chen Yang didn’t dare speak facing the window. He turned aside and whispered, “They’re saying his constitution is wrecked beyond repair, that he’s as fragile as porcelain. Few are brave enough to prescribe any real medicine.”

“That’s what they said about Yuanzhuo back then.” Qiao Tianya resisted the urge to raise his voice at the physicians. After a moment’s pause, he continued, “It’s true His Lordship ruined his health in his early years consuming that medication, but recently he’s been recuperating properly at home. He shouldn’t be so delicate he can’t be treated.”

“Master also truly wants to be well. He’s been taking his medicine without complaint and on schedule.” Fei Sheng clutched the handkerchief he’d used to dry himself. He was worried sick. “I suppose his injuries in the battle were just too much.”

The room, heavy with the scent of medicine, needed to be aired out, but no one wanted to provoke Er-ye at the moment. Everyone stood under the eaves and waited to be summoned. A servant entered with medicine, and not a moment later, they heard Shen Zechuan vomiting.

Xiao Chiye, propping up Shen Zechuan on the bed, touched his back and found it drenched with sweat. The medicine mixed with bile on the ground. Shen Zechuan had nothing left to bring up; after the bile was gone,

he dry-heaved. His stomach twisted, and his bouts of vomiting were so constant he retched himself awake.

A dense fog rose in the middle of the night. The lights of the lanterns, deathly white through the mist, swayed in the wind. The shuffle of footsteps in the passageways never stopped. Rain soaked the ground and seeped into the rooms, turning the whole place so damp the bedding had already had to be changed once.

"Prepare a charcoal brazier," Fei Sheng said apprehensively. "Keep the fire going to dry the room."

Chen Yang saw crimson on the bandages the attendants carried out. He didn't know if the blood belonged to Xiao Chiye or Shen Zechuan.

Li Xiong sat cross-legged by the door and slept for a while. He stirred halfway through the night. Fei Sheng sent for rice from the kitchen, and Li Xiong buried his head in the large bowl and wolfed it down. Once he had eaten his fill, he continued his vigil, staring at the people entering and exiting.

"Try to get Er-ye to sleep for a while at dawn." Qiao Tianya squatted beside a pillar and lit his pipe. "Even a man forged from iron like him can't keep going like this. He can sleep inside; we'll guard the—"

He paused as a hand reached out from the dark and gently nudged his pipe aside. Qiao Tianya turned back and looked at Yao Wenyu.

"It smells." Yao Wenyu turned his wheelchair to face the main room.

Willowy wisps of pipe smoke spiraled into the shadows, turning into a single point of tenderness in this sopping night. Qiao Tianya braced his hands on his knees and stood, extinguishing the pipe.

It was silent in the courtyard by the time dawn broke. Morning light replaced the dark. The guards rotating through the night watch were all wearing out, even as passive as the waiting was. Fei Sheng was leaning against the pillar for a breather, eyes closed, when his ears suddenly twitched. He opened his eyes, and after a long moment, spotted movement at the gate.

"He's here." Fei Sheng leapt down the steps. "Gu Jin's here!"

One of the lanterns under the eaves went out. Hearing the disturbance, Xiao Chiye lifted the blinds a crack.

"Er-ye." Gu Jin, who had braved the elements the entire arduous journey, hurried in and dropped to one knee in the outer room. "Forgive my tardiness! I was still on my way when I heard the Biansha Horsemen had laid siege to Duanzhou. Even though I took the roads, I didn't make it in time."

Xiao Chiye had jolted to his feet. He emerged from the inner chamber for the first time in days. The handful of men on the veranda outside listened with bated breath.

Gu Jin's face was still wet with rain. He met Xiao Chiye's gaze and reported without delay, "Er-ye, Master Yideng…is indeed dead."

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Chapter 254:
Jiran

RAINDROPS DASHED the fallen flowers into the mud, then tore the fragile petals to pieces. The wind raked across the bamboo blinds, making the scene inside the room hard to see, as if viewed from behind a fluttering fan.

"I went to Hezhou and tracked down Master Yideng's remaining family. They confirmed that after the venerable master returned to Hezhou, he was captured by the Yan Clan under the pretext of consulting for an illness." Gu Jin paused for a breath. "But heaven never leaves one in the lurch—Jiran!"

Every guard at the door tensed in anticipation, but Gu Jin didn't continue. When he said *jiran*—"because"—they all waited with bated breath for him to finish his sentence. *Because?* Because what?

Li Xiong had his hand in a jar of candied fruit when he saw an egg pop out from the end of the walkway. Wrapped in a roomy cassock, the egg held up two trailing sleeves and scurried over, stealing a glance at the candied fruit as he ran past Li Xiong. The moment of distraction caused him to trip over himself and fall into the bamboo blinds with a crash.

"Ah!" The egg, sprawled on the ground, lifted his head and called, "Greetings to Er-ye!"

Everyone fixed their eyes on the newcomer—not an egg, but a little monk fifteen years old at most, even younger than Ding Tao. Dragging his sodden sleeves, the little monk put his palms together and said solemnly, "Amitabha!"

He had a lilting Hezhou accent, and from his mouth, the Buddhist greeting sounded more like *Ani-tabha*.

"Er-ye," Gu Jin said. "This boy is the reason the venerable master was willing to return to Hezhou."

“Yes, mm-hmm.” Jiran nodded his head earnestly. “He did indeed return for this humble monk.”

“Master Yideng was getting on in years. He knew he didn’t have much time left. But Jiran was too young to be left alone, so the venerable master returned to Hezhou to place him under the care of his distant relatives. It was there that he crossed paths with the Yan Clan.”

“Young Master Yan said he was going to bring me to play.” Blinking his round, clear eyes, Jiran continued, “But I had to fetch the water. He got impatient waiting and took Shifu away without me.”

Xiao Chiye noted the boy’s youth, and his last remaining hope, so freshly ignited, was thoroughly extinguished.

Gu Jin seemed to sense Xiao Chiye’s thoughts. “Jiran might be young, but he has inherited the wealth of Master Yideng’s legacy. His medical skills are unmatched. With him consulting for the governor, Er-ye —”

“Nuh-uh.” Jiran shook his head hard. “No way. How can the light from a firefly begin to compare to the brilliant moon? My shifu and I are like the boundless ocean and the narrow brook—there’s no comparison!”

His face was still round with baby fat. Not only did he look childlike, even his words were full of innocence and naivete. Li Xiong forgot his candied fruit and joined Ding Tao in peering through the doorway to size up this boiled egg.

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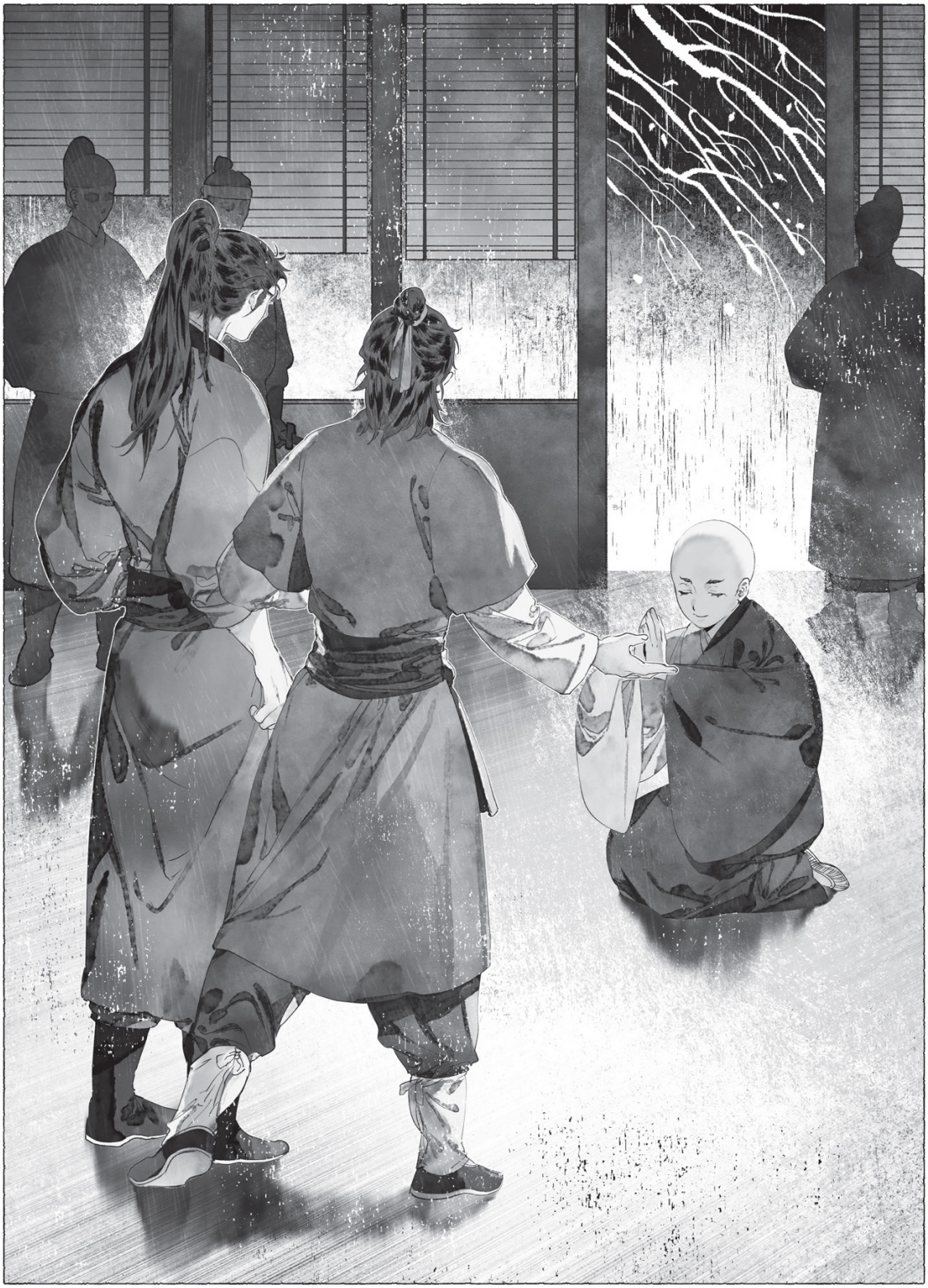

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Gu Jin hoisted Jiran up by the back of his collar and tossed him toward the inner room. “Go look at him first!”

Jiran took Shen Zechuan’s pulse, frowning at times and mumbling to himself at others.

“What do you think?” Xiao Chiye asked in a hushed voice.

The monk lowered his gaze to Shen Zechuan’s wrist. At length, he said, “His Lordship sure is fair.”

There was no trace of guile on Jiran’s tender face; his eyes were bright and clear. He voiced this compliment as naturally as if praising a crystal spring or a fluffy, white cloud. Xiao Chiye’s terrifying possessiveness found no footing there.

“His Lordship’s body is indeed weak due to the adverse effects of the medication he took in his youth. Fortunately, he has been meticulously cared for these past months, and his vital energy is intact.” Jiran rolled up his sleeves, lifted his brush, and thought long and hard before writing a prescription on the paper before him.

Xiao Chiye didn’t dare relax. “So he only needs to take this prescription?”

“Of course not. External injuries are still injuries. He was stabbed! Don’t fret if he passes out or even briefly stops breathing tonight.” Jiran regretfully continued, “But I must advise you to keep His Lordship from fighting again. His body is simply not suited to such an aggressive boxing style. When he throws a punch, yes, his adversary will hurt, but he will feel the pain too. It’s truly not worth it. If he can make it through another two nights and his fever subsides, he will need years of careful recovery to get better. His Lordship ought to write with his left hand for the next half a year.”

Jiran handed the prescription over and took the opportunity to look at the gash on Xiao Chiye’s palm. “Even though Er-ye is fit and healthy, you have to remember to rest as well. This injury needs to stay dry if it’s to heal.”

“How many years?” Xiao Chiye asked.

Jiran rubbed his head. “I’m not too sure myself. But you can’t go wrong with a good rest!”

Xiao Chiye clutched the prescription and glanced toward the lowered drapes around the bed. Shen Zechuan’s breathing was gentle, though he was still unconscious. His extended wrist in the dim lamplight was just as fair as Jiran had said, so delicate it seemed it would melt at a single touch.

In the grip of the fever, Shen Zechuan dreamed. He stood before the gates of Qudu at age fifteen, waiting for his shifu, shiniang, and Ji Mu to take him home. Wrapped in the short padded coat Hua Pingting had sewn him, he watched fine snow drift down like powder along the city walls.

Ji Mu leaned over the top of the wall and shouted, “Chuan-er, where are you going?”

Clutching his new coat, Shen Zechuan said dazedly, “I’m going home.”

Ji Mu raised his head and followed Shen Zechuan’s gaze east—the direction of Duanzhou. “Then wait a little longer. Father’ll be here soon.”

Shen Zechuan couldn’t remember why he had to stand here. He waited from dawn till dusk, and even though it was snowing, he felt very warm.

Ji Mu rubbed his arms and looked down again. “It’s cold up here. Want to come warm yourself by the fire?”

Shen Zechuan shook his head. “Too hot.”

And so Ji Mu started a fire at the top of the city wall. He held out his hands for warmth. “When we return, Ge will be able to get married. Mother’s been nagging about it for years.”

They waited a very long time. Shen Zechuan’s back was aching, as were his calves. Every part of him hurt. He wiped sweat from his brow and continued to gaze into the distance.

When the sky turned dark, Ji Mu murmured, “Father isn’t coming.” His fire had burned down to embers. He stood and pulled on the military coat beside him, then leaned over the top of the wall. Flashing a grin, he called, “Chuan-er.”

Shen Zechuan raised his head and took a few steps toward him.

"The whistle is calling me," Ji Mu said. "I can't wait anymore. I have to go."

Shen Zechuan nodded, accustomed to it. "Go on, then. I'll tell Mother."

Ji Mu's brows crimped in a troubled expression. He said with a sigh, "I'm worried. You—"

"I'll walk back from here." Shen Zechuan raised a hand and pointed into the distance. "It's not far."

Ji Mu looked at Shen Zechuan, his eyes gentle. "What am I to do with my little brother?"

The sound of hooves rose in the darkness. Shen Zechuan bounced up on his toes and yelled, "Ge, Shifu is here!"

Ji Mu said nothing. He kept his chin propped in his hands and smiled.

Shen Zechuan turned and saw a gyrfalcon soaring over the horizon, followed by a galloping horse that was black all over with a snow-white patch on its chest. He froze as the horse came closer.

A youth sat in the saddle, his face obscured by a helmet. The gyrfalcon landed on his shoulder. He removed the helmet, revealing an unhappy expression, then bent over and scrutinized Shen Zechuan. "What are you standing there for? Get on. Er-gongzi will take you away."

Shen Zechuan ignored him, so Xiao Chiye dismounted, put his helmet on Shen Zechuan's head, and hoisted him up.

"Ah, no," Shen Zechuan protested, smothered by the helmet. "I want to go home."

Xiao Chiye flicked Shen Zechuan with a finger, impervious to reason. "You're coming with me." He took a few steps, then asked, frustrated, "Don't you recognize me?"

"No."

Xiao Chiye made to toss Shen Zechuan into the snow. Shen Zechuan panicked as he felt himself thrown into the air, but Xiao Chiye caught him

again with steady hands. The gyrfalcon settled back on his shoulder, and he burst out laughing as he gazed at Shen Zechuan.

Shen Zechuan lifted the helmet and looked up at him, baffled.

The darkening sky abruptly brightened. The wind tousled Xiao Chiye's hair, and the city walls around them that blocked their line of sight melted away to reveal a boundless expanse of grassland spreading out beneath their feet. Xiao Chiye held Shen Zechuan and greedily stroked his cheek.

"I want to hide you away." Xiao Chiye raised his voice over the wind. "I'll put you into my breast pocket."

Shen Zechuan couldn't hear him clearly. He lifted his head. "What did you say?"

Xiao Chiye kissed him hard on the cheek. "I said you're really good-looking. Too damn good-looking. No one will ever surpass you in looks, I swear!"

Shen Zechuan covered his cheek and yelled back, "You're lying!"

Ignoring his struggle, Xiao Chiye hugged him tight and said in his ear, "Tell me I'm wrong."

The wind stilled, and Xiao Chiye swiftly grew up. His broad shoulders blocked the light as he embraced Shen Zechuan, and his expression was drowsy, as if he had just woken up, yet at the same time as if he were still a part of the dream. His unbound hair wove with Shen Zechuan's, spreading over the bedding. A little braid lay across the middle.

Shen Zechuan opened bleary eyes and let his mind float for a while. Wearily, he said, "It's tied together."

"Mm-hmm." Xiao Chiye lifted the little braid with one long finger. "Hair bound together as husband and wife."

Shen Zechuan had only just woken, and he was still getting his bearings. Xiao Chiye rubbed his back. "Time to get up."

He stroked Shen Zechuan's back until Shen Zechuan turned slightly to pillow his head on Xiao Chiye's chest. Xiao Chiye's hands were callused, and the rasp as they moved over his skin was pleasant. Shen Zechuan's eyes

were nearly closed, but he didn't forget to chide Xiao Chiye: "You're so noisy."

Xiao Chiye nuzzled him hard with his unshaven chin. "You're going to be the death of me, Shen Lanzhou."

Shen Zechuan poked Xiao Chiye's cheek with his right hand, so wound with bandages it resembled a plump dumpling. Then, as natural as gravity, the two shared a listless kiss.

That day, the days of rain ceased, and the sun shone over Duanzhou.

Jiran had been modest about his skill, but three days later, Shen Zechuan could sit up and eat congee. The little monk stood by the window, piously reciting "Anitabha." When Xiao Chiye asked what he wanted as a reward, Jiran pointed toward Li Xiong's candy jar without hesitation.

Everyone heaved a sigh of relief and handed the candy jar over before Li Xiong could protest.

The window in the room was open. Shen Zechuan rested against a cushion and listened to Fei Sheng finish his report.

"You're right. If they were meant to be spies, there'd be no need for them to have such obvious marks on their bodies." Shen Zechuan held Yuanzhuo's report in his left hand. It covered all the business from the last few days that required his personal attention. "You think they have the lizard tattoo to distinguish themselves from ordinary Scorpions?"

"Apparently, the Lizards work directly under Amur," Qiao Tianya explained, "and they pride themselves on being a branch of the Hanma tribe. Joril was a warrior, so it's not odd that he had a tattoo. But it only makes sense for infiltrating Lizards to have tattoos if they're concerned about being confused for Scorpions."

"What does Youjing think?" Xiao Chiye asked.

"The household registrations the assassins used were legitimate. Two men with those names undoubtedly existed in Fanzhou—but they've probably been replaced," Fei Sheng said. "After all, we only record their names, not their appearances."

"That can't be helped," Kong Ling said in a steady voice. "The census register needs to be updated every year. Even if all the yamen drew portraits during the verification process, they wouldn't be kept for long."

Qiao Tianya's conjecture seemed the most plausible. Why did the infiltrating Lizards need to have tattoos? There would be no escape for them if ever they were caught. Amur treated them as his own private soldiers. Even Joril had merely been loaned to Hassen, which showed how highly Amur regarded them. If it was really to differentiate themselves from Scorpions, then it must have to do with the Scorpions who regularly spent time in Zhongbo.

Xiao Chiye leaned forward. He knew the military maps of the eastern regions like the back of his hand. "Duanzhou is across the river from Gedal, and Amur is even farther than that. Even the fastest horse couldn't bring the news instantly. Even Hassen's saker falcons couldn't have made it back that quickly. These two Lizards were not sent by Amur."

If Amur had made any move, it would have been because Qi Zhuyin attacked Gedal and Hassen couldn't come to its aid. He would only have learned of Hassen's death in the past few days. Given the challenges of crossing the Chashi River, he couldn't have issued the order for these Lizards to assassinate Shen Zechuan—there simply wouldn't have been time.

Understanding flashed in Yao Wenyu's eyes. "If the Lizards are Amur's private soldiers, they're unlikely to heed the commands of anyone else. If Amur didn't give the assassination order, then it's possible someone gave them the order in Amur's name."

Fei Sheng furrowed his brow. "If that's true, then there must still be a Scorpion or Lizard nearby, one who knows all the goings-on in Duanzhou."

Always the first to get nervous, Gao Zhongxiong exclaimed, "Then isn't that terrible? This person seems very familiar with Zhongbo!"

Qiao Tianya shook his head. "If these Lizards were longtime residents of the six prefectures, then even if they had proof of household registration, any tattoo would also have been recorded. They must have only just snuck their way in."

"The yamen's checks are strict," Kong Ling said. "It would be hard for them to sneak into the city unnoticed. They would have to evade the guards' inspections."

"There is one way." Chen Yang bowed slightly to the governor as he pointed out, "The Scorpions of Cizhou are not subjected to questioning within the territory. They move freely with Haerigu."

Haerigu's Scorpions had originally been confined to the Beiyuan Training Grounds under the strict supervision of the garrison troops. Not until their contribution at the battle at the Chashi Sinkhole did Zhongbo loosen their shackles. If there were Lizards mixed in with Haerigu's men, then the tattoos would make sense.

Fei Sheng promptly said, "Haerigu's negotiation with the Youxiong tribe didn't go as planned either. Master, maybe I should—"

"What's the hurry? The Youxiong tribe has retreated in defeat, and the Qingshu tribe's territory has been completely vacated." Shen Zechuan set down the report and turned to Xiao Chiye. "Let's give the Qingshu tribe's land to Haerigu."

Xiao Chiye raised his brows slightly.

"Haerigu brokered an alliance with the Youxiong tribe on my behalf, but the Youxiong tribe reneged on our agreement." A glint of ruthlessness flashed in Shen Zechuan's tired eyes. "The price for betrayal must be paid. Let Haerigu collect on this debt for me."

There was only one reason Haerigu might have instigated the Lizards hiding in his nest of Scorpions into an assassination attempt: to ignite the flames of war as soon as possible. He wanted land. Like Dalantai, he seemed to be wavering in his loyalties, but in truth, he was working loyally to benefit himself.

Xiao Chiye had killed Achi at the Chashi Sinkhole, leaving the Biansha Scorpions without a leader. Haerigu had no more rivals among them. If he returned to the desert now, he could take control of the remaining Scorpions. After all, this was the same man who had dared to do business with Yan Heru. If and when the situation changed, he would have no scruples about turning around and working with Amur again.

If Shen Zechuan killed Haerigu, he would merely be disposing of yet another exposed Scorpion. Amur had no lack of Scorpions to replace him. Instead, Shen Zechuan would not only spare Haerigu, but give him the land he yearned for. He wanted Haerigu to firmly occupy the area around Zhongbo, controlling the flow of Scorpions there and becoming a thorn in Amur's side.

At the same time, Shen Zechuan wanted to teach Haerigu a hard lesson.

If Haerigu wanted the Qingshu tribe's land, he'd have to solve the problem of the Youxiong tribe. But if he attacked the Youxiong tribe outright, the Twelve Tribes would no longer accept him, and Amur would no longer trust him. He would shoulder the Youxiong's tribe's eternal hatred, for he would be the blade-wielding executioner who had carried out an outsider's order of punishment.

The governor planned to use his resources to the fullest.

Shen Zechuan had grown tired from sitting. As the others rose to leave him to his rest, he said, "Don't retire to bed just yet, Yuanzhuo. Jiran will be over in a while to take a look at you."

Jiran was still a child at heart. He jumped over puddles as he followed Gu Jin, and upon seeing his own smooth, round head reflected in the water, couldn't help but double over with laughter.

Qiao Tianya met them at the entrance. Putting his palms together in a bow, he said to Jiran, "Please come in."

Jiran returned the greeting. The birds chirped in the trees, and the weather was pleasantly warm. Dressed in monk's robes, Jiran stood between puddles big and small, each a reflection of the blue sky and white clouds. It was an entrancing sight, blurring the line between heaven and earth.

"Benefactor." Jiran followed his shifu's example and nodded slowly to Qiao Tianya. "You have an affinity with the Buddha."

Qiao Tianya found that amusing. "When I was young, I met a monk who said the same thing. But as you can see, I have yet to renounce the

world and join you."

Jiran examined him. When he was quiet, he had an otherworldly aura—not the so-called detachment born from rejection of the mundane world, but rather a natural transcendence. The little monk, pure and untainted, observed the secular world through placid eyes.

"Clear waters have no worries but wrinkle in the wind; green hills do not age but sport a white crown from snow.[3] Destiny arises from causes and conditions. Benefactor, the cause is already in place; you only lack the conditions that will make it so." The refreshing breeze lifted a corner of Jiran's robe and dropped the hem into a puddle. He clapped his palms gently, looking completely serious in his naivete, as if already certain of Qiao Tianya's future.

The wind chimes under the eaves swayed in the breeze. Qiao Tianya turned his head and saw Yao Wenyu sitting beneath them. With his sleeves fluttering with the wind, he gave off the same otherworldliness as Jiran strolling among the white clouds in the puddles.

Jiran approached Yao Wenyu but didn't bow. Under the tinkling wind chimes, he studied him. Eventually, he shook his head. "I can't heal your legs. Even if my shifu were alive, he couldn't do it."

Yao Wenyu put a hand over Hunu on his lap. "All earthly phenomena are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow, like the dew and the flash of lightning. And thus shall we perceive them."[4]

The confluence of causes and conditions in the world was in constant flux. Yao Wenyu was no longer preoccupied with his legs. Long before he declared *I am still standing* at the debate in Chazhou, he had already extricated himself from this fixation. It made no difference whether he stood or sat. He was himself, whatever form he took.

Jiran sighed. "Others want me to speak of Buddha, yet you speak of them to me. Living in view of your own mortality—you've seen the end, so why linger here? Come with me into the mountains."

"I still see all things in my heart," Yao Wenyu said.

Gazing steadily at Yao Wenyu, Jiran raised a finger to point at Qiao Tianya. "You still see him in your heart."

The wind caught at Yao Wenyu's sleeves, and the red cord slid down his wrist. "That is why I am still an ordinary mortal."

The chain of cause and effect, of predestined relationships, was beyond human comprehension. When was the wheel of fate set into motion? Perhaps it was the night that red cord was braided, or perhaps it was that one utterance of *I hate you so much*. Or perhaps even earlier, in the third month, when spring was budding in the air. Qiao Tianya, Qiao Songyue—he was the swallow that left its mark across the sky.

Yao Wenyu understood that all of existence was mere illusion. Everything he did today would vanish into the infinite river of time at the snap of a finger. Yao Wenyu, Yao Yuanzhuo—he was the leaf that returned to dust upon the earth.

"I have nothing to give you." Jiran inclined his head slightly.

Yao Wenyu looked toward Shen Zechuan's courtyard and smiled. "You have already given me what I want."

The wind kicked up yellow sand and stirred the Bianjun military banner, sending it fluttering. Qi Zhuyin removed her helmet. There was sand between her teeth. Qi Wei handed her a handkerchief. She couldn't strip off her armor and wipe down as the male generals did, so she bore the scorching heat and wiped her face with restraint.

"Duanzhou has sent several new reports," Qi Wei said. "The report from the Libei front line is here too."

"Lu Guangbai is on the front line. What else can it be but the retreat of the Biansha troops?" Qi Zhuyin set down Banisher and edged behind the wall to cool off in the shade. "The Duanzhou reports are from Xiao Chiye. Go ahead."

Qi Wei opened the private letter and read it out to Qi Zhuyin.

Her hands stilled in the middle of folding her handkerchief. She looked at Qi Wei and repeated, "Give the Qingshu tribe's territory to the Scorpions?"

Qi Wei read it through again to ensure there was no mistake before he nodded.

Qi Zhuyin's nonchalant expression slowly settled into a frown. The armor on her shoulders was light, but when she wore it for long enough, its weight still made her shoulders sore.

"Get a brush," she said. "Reply to Xiao Chiye immediately. I don't approve."

Her Qidong Garrison Troops had rounded up the Qingshu tribe. Qi Zhuyin had no use for their territory and could give it to Libei or Zhongbo—but she had no wish to hand it over to the Scorpions. Xiao Chiye wanted Haerigu to occupy the Qingshu tribe's territory? If she allowed it, from then on, there would be a nest of Scorpions at her doorstep who could turn around and sting her at any time.

Her reply was exactly as Xiao Chiye expected. He pillowed his head on his arms and said to Shen Zechuan, "Qidong's terrain is its advantage. Expanding eastward would weaken the effectiveness of their defense at the Bianjun Commandery, and the twin bulwarks that are Tianfei Watchtower and Suotian Pass would lose their purpose. It will be tough to get Marshal Qi to agree to this."

Shen Zechuan was nearly asleep, but he replied, "Libei was willing to accept the submission of the Huiyan tribe, and the armored cavalry receives the benefits of their coarse tea trade. For Qidong, the advantage of expanding their territory outward from the Bianjun Commandery will far outweigh the disadvantages. It will also reduce the burden of military expenses placed on Marshal Qi in the future."

More than half the coarse tea that the traveling merchants had sold in Juexi had come from the Huiyan tribe at Libei's trade market. Shen Zechuan had given all the revenue back to the Libei Armored Cavalry, which was unmatched when it came to the speed at which its members depleted their equipment.

As he thought it through, Shen Zechuan's drowsiness faded. Unable to turn over at will, all he could do was lie face up next to Xiao Chiye. "A war can last a lifetime. But what about the next life?"

"Next life." Xiao Chiye covered his face with the letter and sighed. "I'd still want to be born in Libei."

Outside, Ding Tao and Li Xiong smashed walnuts on the veranda with Jiran, the boys laughing merrily as they played. Insects sang raucously under the blazing sun, a chorus of chirps.

"Amur spent his whole life attempting to unify the Twelve Tribes in vain," Xiao Chiye said after a while. "My old man thought Amur would become the great king of the desert."

"You don't understand why Amur didn't succeed." Shen Zechuan tipped his head toward Xiao Chiye. "But I'll let you in on the secret."

Xiao Chiye set aside the letter and turned to him. The warm weather made him feel sluggish. "Hm?"

"Because Libei has Xiao Ce'an." Shen Zechuan raised his eyes and gazed at him. "You want to cross the river and advance eastward—to go to Amur."

Xiao Chiye suddenly covered Shen Zechuan's eyes. The weather was so, so hot. He inched closer and whispered, "My wife understands me so well."

The corners of Shen Zechuan's lips curved smugly. Xiao Chiye lowered his eyes and couldn't help but kiss him; he so loved seeing Shen Zechuan this way.

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Chapter 255:
Qingshan

ALL THE GARDENS in Qudu were a lush emerald green. Potted plants lined the courtyard outside Mingli Hall. Eunuchs carried basins filled with chunks of ice and placed them in the corners of the hall to dispel the heat, while outside, the court officials perspired as they waited under the eaves for a summons. Wiping their brows would be a breach of decorum, so they forced themselves to endure it, letting sweat soak through their robes.

The bamboo blinds at the entrance of Mingli Hall lifted, and Fengquan emerged with a horsetail whisk resting in the crook of his arm. He bowed in greeting to the ministers and said softly, "The heat is unbearable, and my lords have worked hard. Her Highness has specially instructed this humble servant to prepare some chilled mung bean soup."

The junior eunuchs swiftly came forward with bowls of soup; even napkin flowers had been prepared in advance. Fengquan bowed once more and retreated into Mingli Hall.

"Her Highness shows such consideration for us humble subjects," a regional official said as he sipped. "We ought to shed tears of gratitude." Amid the tapping of spoons against porcelain bowls, a capital official turned to Jiang Qingshan, who was standing beside him. "How do you find the accommodations at the relay station, Wanxiao?"

Jiang Qingshan finished his soup and gave a slight nod. His quiet reply seemed at odds with the swift and resolute man of the rumors. His manner was mild and unhurried, as if he didn't particularly care about anything. An hour later, when a eunuch called his name, Jiang Qingshan entered the hall, where he knelt and bowed to pay his respects.

"This humble subject, the Provincial Administration Commissioner of Juexi, Jiang Qingshan, pays his respects to Your Highness."

"Please rise, Wanxiao," Li Jianting said. "The weather is hot today, and I've made you stand outside long enough. The Grand Secretary and I

were just talking about Juexi, and I saw from your memorial that the city of Yongcheng has gone without rain for more than a month. The local granaries are beginning to run low, so you wish to borrow grain from Huaizhou."

"Last year, Juexi bore the imperial court's grain requisition for the sake of Qidong's troops. The thirteen cities' granaries are depleted." Jiang Qingshan did not raise his head. "We didn't expect a drought."

From his place off to the side, Kong Qiu said to Li Jianting, "Yongcheng is in the southwest. If this drought is severe, I fear it will be difficult to get through it with borrowed grain alone. The court will still need to organize relief."

Li Jianting pondered this. The flower embellishment on her forehead was a stark and brilliant red. After a moment, she said, "During the reign of Xiande, you offended the local merchants in order to provide relief to disaster victims—so much so that they blockaded you in the yamen. This year, you are taking on difficult negotiations with Huaizhou for the sake of borrowing grain. It has been hard on you. Drought in Yongcheng is a serious matter, but there is no need to worry. An edict has already been issued, and the Grand Secretary and I will present a solution as soon as possible. Rest assured, the court will organize the relief efforts."

Jiang Qingshan was accustomed to hearing excuses every time he came to the capital. Neither the Tianchen Emperor nor the Xiande Emperor had ever demonstrated such a decisive and straightforward attitude. His expression grew solemn as he kowtowed. "This humble subject knows that the imperial court also has to give consideration to the war in Qidong this year. The military provisions have priority. Juexi is willing to offset our debt by exchanging silk for food from Huaizhou."

At this, Kong Qiu's temper flared. "The official transfer of public grain should be implemented immediately after Her Highness's endorsement. Why does Tao Ming, Huaizhou's prefect, defy the edict? Huaizhou had a bumper harvest last year. According to the memorial Tao Ming presented at the beginning of the year, he has grain to spare."

"The imperial edict was issued several days ago," Li Jianting said. "Fengquan, go out and ask if Tao Ming has arrived. If he has, summon him here to explain himself."

Before Fengquan could step out, Fuman appeared at the door and said anxiously, “Your Highness, a letter arrived from the relay station. Tao Ming, the prefect of Huaizhou, has fled with his entire family!”

Li Jianting was taken aback. “He fled? The imperial court is merely summoning him here for a discussion. Why did he flee?”

Fuman stomped his foot lightly. “He’s defected to Shen Zechuan of Zhongbo!”

Murmured discussion promptly filled the hall.

Chen Zhen, the Minister of War, frowned. “Borrowing grain is commonplace. Why did he run? There has to be a reason!”

“Your Highness may not be aware,” Fuman said, his voice pinched. “The official who traveled to Huaizhou to summon him opened the granary there only to find it practically empty. There’s no relief grain to be had. Tao Ming has been colluding with Shen Zechuan to sell his grain to Cizhou for a long time. The moment he heard Juexi asked to borrow grain, he was so frightened he fled that very night!”

An uproar broke out in the hall. Cen Yu leapt to his feet. “What…? Why did the local investigating censor never say anything?!”

Huaizhou had no grain, and Hezhou’s granaries were likewise empty. They couldn’t count on the eight great cities either. Then what of Yongcheng? Juexi would have no choice but to tighten their belts and carefully ration what meager stores they had.

The atmosphere in the hall grew tense. The chilled air from the ice basins seemed to pervade the hall, so cold that Kong Qiu felt a stabbing pain behind his heart. Covering his mouth, he coughed for a moment; when it subsided, he stood and bowed to Li Jianting. “Disaster relief is of critical importance and cannot be delayed. The monthly salaries of the officials in the capital must be reduced accordingly. This humble subject will volunteer myself. We must not let the commoners starve!”

The officials in the courtyard all glanced at each other, then knelt and echoed, “We humble subjects are willing. We ask for Your Highness’s blessing.”

Palace eunuchs had rid the trees of cicadas; in the silence, Li Jianting rose to her feet and said with a sigh, “After such a display of sincerity from all you gentlemen, I would be remiss to turn you down. Since it’s for the sake of the people of Yongcheng, the palace will cut its spending accordingly. Wanxiao, you are the one who came seeking grain, so I will leave it to you to make arrangements for the relief aid.”

Jiang Qingshan kowtowed and expressed his gratitude.

That night, moonlight lay like a thin layer of gauze over Xue Xiuzhuo’s courtyard, where a spread of dishes and chopsticks had been laid out. The mute servant boy was the only attendant present.

Xue Xiuzhuo, dressed in a day robe, poured tea for Jiang Qingshan. “My apologies for the poor hospitality.”

Jiang Qingshan accepted the tea and sighed. “I’ve been plagued by one social engagement after another since arriving in the capital, but none of those rare and extravagant delicacies are as good as your simple and homely fare.”

“The life of the poor.” Xue Xiuzhuo set down the teapot and, in a rare moment of levity, teased, “What kind of provincial lord are you? You don’t even take a decent carriage when you go out.”

“I am truly poor, while you are only playing at it,” Jiang Qingshan said. “But tonight we are two of a kind: scholars who reek of genteel poverty!”

The two men clinked their teacups and burst into laughter.

“I can see that the heir apparent is intelligent. She treats those under her with wisdom, and she is decisive in her handling of court business. In this, she takes after the Guangcheng Emperor.” Jiang Qingshan picked up his chopsticks and served himself from the plate of chilled tofu with spring onions. “It’s just that she’s a tad stiff, and her manner of speaking is too mature for her age.”

“She grew up in hardship, so it’s no surprise that she’s different from the average girl.” Xue Xiuzhuo watched Jiang Qingshan eat. “I remember

your letter from the beginning of the year. You mentioned Liu-niang was with child?"

Jiang Qingshan's chopsticks slowed, and he cast a glance at Xue Xiuzhuo. His smile faded. "The usual."

Xue Xiuzhuo did not probe further.

Jiang Qingshan had a wife but no children. His wife hailed from the Liu Clan of Baimazhou—not a rich family by any means. She and Jiang Qingshan shared a loving marriage, but they had yet to be blessed with a child. Liu-niang's health had been poor for some time. She had first fallen pregnant during the fourth year of Xiande, when Jiang Qingshan was running all over the land to borrow grain. The merchants who stormed their doorstep demanding repayments had given Liu-niang such a fright that she miscarried the child. After that, it had been hard for her to conceive again.

"Why do you look so dejected?" Jiang Qingshan set down his chopsticks. "If I'm destined to have no son, then so be it. It's not something that can be forced." He looked at a cluster of flowers at the edge of the yard, pausing for a moment. "It's just that my mother has been growing impatient, and it's inevitable that she treats Liu-niang rather… Alas."

Jiang Qingshan's mother, in her anxiety over a grandson, was known to be harsh on her daughter-in-law.

"My mother is getting on in years, and she's been strong-willed all her life. It's been hard on Liu-niang, attending to her. I've been so busy with government affairs all these years that I've neglected my own household. I've failed to live up to the vow I made to her when we married." Jiang Qingshan always became emotional when mentioning his family. "At the beginning of the year, my mother brought some distant niece home. She said it was only a visit, but the girl's still there now. Several times I've gone back home to see Liu-niang standing under the eaves attending to my mother according to the strictest customs, yet Mother still wants to make a match for me with another woman…"

"If you're unwilling, it'd be better to turn the girl down outright," Xue Xiuzhuo said as he picked up the teapot to refill his guest's tea. "Lest the old lady think there's still hope, and you end up breaking Liu-niang's heart."

Jiang Qingshan stayed Xue Xiuzhuo's hand. "Let's have wine instead."

"I have official duties to attend to tomorrow morning." Xue Xiuzhuo glanced at the mute servant and motioned for him to fetch the wine.

"This place is rather empty with only you living in it." Jiang Qingshan gestured to the courtyard around them. "It's about time you settled down with a wife of your own."

"Han Cheng has only just been eliminated, and the investigation of the field taxes has yet to conclude." Xue Xiuzhuo took the wine from the servant and poured only for Jiang Qingshan. "If I take a wife, I'd be leaving her alone in this empty manor to waste her youth. Why make a young lady miserable?"

"There is no end to the work," Jiang Qingshan said. "Don't tell me you're going to carry on like this until you grow old and die?"

Xue Xiuzhuo nodded solemnly and moved on from sentiment to a discussion of official business. "The drought in Yongcheng is not as severe as the one during the reign of Xiande, but it has already put you in a terrible fix. Merely reducing salaries in Qudu is useless if rain still refuses to fall after the seventh month, or if drought hits another of the thirteen cities. People are going to die in Juexi."

Jiang Qingshan sipped his wine. "The Grand Secretariat is willing in spirit but lacking in power. If there was a surplus of grain, the Grand Secretary would never have to resort to this. I've been meaning to ask you —are the eight cities' granaries really empty?"

"Yes. The grain we confiscated from the Pan Clan of Dancheng is not even enough to feed the palace," Xue Xiuzhuo admitted.

"In the past we lacked money, and now we lack grain." Jiang Qingshan shook his head. "If we had sent capable men to reorganize the six prefectures of Zhongbo earlier, we could have recovered all those fertile lands. Shen Zechuan would never have had the chance to make himself the local overlord, and our great Zhou would not be in the predicament it is today."

"Zhongbo now boasts the most abundant granaries in the land," Xue Xiuzhuo agreed. "If the drought in Juexi worsens by the end of summer,

we'll have to consider buying grain from Shen Zechuan."

"I fear it will be tough. Who would have imagined Shen Zechuan could bring the six prefectures under his rule? I'm sure you've heard—that battle in Duanzhou won him the hearts of the people. And this is a man who holds grudges. He won't sell to you so easily."

Xue Xiuzhuo set the wine jar aside. "If he wants to make a name for himself as a champion of benevolence and righteousness, he cannot simply sit back and watch drought ravage Juexi."

They discussed other official business until late in the evening. When it was time to retire, Xue Xiuzhuo sent his servant boy to escort Jiang Qingshan back to his lodgings. As Jiang Qingshan was leaving, he pointed at the front hall. "I met your eldest brother when I arrived at the relay station. He was there to burn offerings for Chengzhi. I see he's been promoted—presumably benefiting from his association with you. Yanqing, he used to make things difficult for you in every way he could merely because he resented sharing a family name. Now his survival depends on your kinship, yet he's still unwilling to say a single kind word about you." A little tipsy now, Jiang Qingshan staggered. "That brother of yours is too smug. I fear he'll drag you down in the future. You need to watch out for him."

Xue Xiuzhuo acknowledged it all.

Ge Qingqing braced one foot on a stool and shook the dice in his cup as if performing a magic trick. "My lord, you lost!"

Face flushed with drink, Xue Xiuyi touched his pocket and exclaimed, "Dear me, I forgot to bring my money pouch when I left home! Qingqing, put it on my tab!"

Ge Qingqing blew on the dice and laughed. "My lord, why play the stranger with me? It ought to be on my tab to begin with. Did you like the tea I sent to your manor a few days ago? The goods from Qinzhou have just arrived. If there's anything you have your eye on, my lord, don't hesitate to let me know."

"No, no, that won't do," Xue Xiuyi said, though he sat back in his seat and lit his pipe at once. "I have no need for such trinkets; I have lots of

that sort of thing in my manor. It's just that the Ministry of Personnel has been making noises about reassigning positions in the imperial court of late, and going by what the palace eunuchs say, there may be a lucrative post available."

Ge Qingqing scooted over and sat down beside him. "Then my lord is due to receive a promotion. Congratulations are in order!"

"But these eunuchs in the palace serve the emperor. They've seen all kinds of treasures, so they turn their noses up at common objects." Xue Xiuyi appeared somewhat hesitant. "Do you have anything from abroad?"

"Sure I do. Plenty. I'll get Xiao-Wu to bring the list over later. My lord, look over it and take your pick." Ge Qingqing leaned closer. "Whatever you choose, I'll gift it to you. Don't you keep me at arm's length!"

Xue Xiuyi promptly burst into laughter. "You're truly my brother!" He pointed at Ge Qingqing. "If this official post really falls into my hands, I'll return you double this gift in the future!"

When Ge Qingqing threw the dice again, he knocked against the low table beside him, seemingly by accident. Nearby, the Embroidered Uniform Guard member disguised as a servant gave a subtle nod and left to prepare tonight's gifts for Xue Xiuyi, not neglecting to line the bottom of the chest with a layer of gold ingots. Outside, the hour grew late, but Xue Xiuyi was enjoying himself to the fullest; he didn't notice a thing.

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Chapter 256:
Ancestor

LI JIANTING WENT FOR A WALK in the garden in the early evening, the only moment of leisure in her entire day. Fengquan strolled by her side as she made her way along the stone path, still thinking about the discussion in the hall that morning.

"The ceremony to honor the heavens and pray for rain is in just a few days." Li Jianting brushed aside a flowering branch hanging by her cheek. "This is a matter of great importance. Nothing must go wrong."

Fengquan held the branch well away from Li Jianting and said deferentially, "This humble servant will see to it."

Li Jianting walked to the edge of the pond and sprinkled fish bait into the water. Watching the carp fighting among themselves, she said, "In the past, when you served Imperial Concubine Mu, I've been told you were arrogant and impudent, which earned you the censure of the court ministers. Now that you've had a close brush with death, it seems you've learned restraint."

The heir apparent, in the midst of pondering political affairs, certainly had not brought up such a personal matter on a whim. There had to be something she was driving at. Fengquan's gaze flickered as he hazarded a guess as to the heir apparent's intent. He bowed and said softly, "The servant takes after the disposition of his master. Your Highness treats others with tolerance and magnanimity, so this humble servant naturally dares not be presumptuous, as I had been before. I'm ashamed to say I was impertinent in the past when I faced the gentlemen from the Grand Secretariat. Now that I have been graced with your favor, I shall take the past as a cautionary tale and draw my lesson from it."

Li Jianting glanced at Fengquan. "You're fine as you are."

Fengquan used to serve the Tianchen Emperor. Li Jianheng had been a simpleminded man, his emotions all clearly written on his face. But ever since Li Jianting entered the palace, she had carefully begun to project the

regal reserve of a sovereign, which made her difficult to read. She showed no preference in her meals; no matter how delicious the food was, she would not put her chopsticks to it more than three times. Similarly, it was tough to discern the emotions behind her words.

"I heard how harshly Fuman treated you in prison, and now you work together in Mingli Hall," Li Jianting said. "Do you not resent him?"

Fengquan went to his knees at once. "This humble eunuch is Your Highness's servant. I'm aware there must be some deeper meaning to Your Majesty's arrangements. Fuman and I have had our disagreements, but he is only doing his job now. I wouldn't dare hold a grudge over this."

"He nearly broke your leg." Li Jianting looked out at the carp still tussling for food.

Fengquan knocked his head against the ground and let his tears fall. "The eunuchs wielding the flogging rods are all old hands from the Eastern Depot. They know not to go too far."

Eyes on the fish, Li Jianting said nonchalantly, "Although Fuman is a veteran eunuch from the former emperor's reign, he only began to serve nearer to the throne after the Eastern Depot was left to wither." She smiled. "I never heard that the late emperor ordered him to manage the affairs of the Eastern Depot, so I didn't expect him to be so familiar with the old-timers there. It seems he may also be well-acquainted with the little people in my palace."

Fengquan used the cover of drying his tears to discreetly wipe his sweat. He instantly understood. Li Jianting had been poisoned in the palace. Everyone who served her was hand-selected by Xue Xiuzhuo, but still, they had failed to thwart the empress dowager's attempt. It stood to reason that someone already familiar with the ins and outs of the palace must've had a hand in it. Li Jianting had used Fuman to help kill Han Cheng, but now that the threat had been eliminated, she wished to settle the score.

After arriving at this conclusion, Fengquan felt a little more at ease. "Fuman is indeed a veteran from the reign of the former emperor. He differs from the others in the inner yamen. He has a wide range of experience, and he's looked upon favorably by several of the gentlemen in the Grand Secretariat. Naturally, he is well-acquainted with many more people than

this humble servant. Although he has plenty of hangers-on, he is cordial to everyone, attentive in his work, and respectful of propriety."

"You're only speaking half the truth. Respectful of propriety? He seems to me rather proud and haughty—more like a lao-zuzong." Li Jianting wiped her hands with a handkerchief. "He is a mere eunuch. He has neither a soldier's accomplishments in defending the state nor a scholar's courage to remonstrate with his sovereign. Yet he can be a lao-zuzong solely by dint of his long years serving before the throne. But whose zuzong—whose ancestor is he?" She looked askance at Fengquan. "Mine?"

The word was breezily spoken, but Fengquan felt a lofty mountain landing, its weight crushing him so utterly that he dared not raise his eyes. He hurriedly knocked his forehead against the ground. "Your Highness is the noblest descendant of the heavens! The glorious legacy of the great founder of your dynasty is entrusted solely into the hands of Your Highness. Your Highness is the supreme ruler of the world!"

Li Jianting handed her handkerchief to a palace maid standing in attendance and said bitterly, "During the Xiande Emperor's time, the rise of the eunuch faction threw our state politics into disarray, so they made an example of a lao-zuzong. I never imagined I'd come across another so soon. Evidently, human greed knows no bounds. All the kind treatment in the world can't win loyalty. Too much favor and trust only lead to disaster. Though I will say, he really is something. If he hadn't shown his hand, he might truly have become my ancestor."

Fuman had underlings aplenty, and he'd also gained allies among the court officials thanks to the opportunities afforded him by working in Mingli Hall. However, he was cleverer than Pan Rugui in one regard: He never dared be lax with his etiquette when he came face-to-face with the Grand Secretariat officials; he'd kowtow to them every ten steps if he could. When Kong Qiu had fallen sick and pushed himself to continue with his official duties despite his illness, Fuman, who had been serving in Mingli Hall at the time, had personally tested Kong Qiu's medicine and taken meticulous care of the Grand Secretary. His attentiveness to the ministers reflected well on Li Jianting.

Fuman had gone to great lengths to win imperial favor, but in doing so, he committed a major taboo: He had also taken it upon himself to curry

favor with the imperial censors. As a eunuch of the inner palace, what was he doing trying to win over the outer court officials? He wanted to be both a lao-zuzong in the palace and an upstanding eunuch outside it. But although he had garnered himself quite a reputation both within and without, he had shirked his real job.

Eunuchs were the servants of the Son of Heaven, and supporting the Son of Heaven was their central duty. It was Pan Rugui who had set the precedent of undermining the court and reduced the power of endorsing memorials to a free pass for eunuchs to line their own pockets. Fuman followed in his footsteps, but he was respectful and modest to those on the outside even while accumulating power on the inside. If Li Jianting wanted to take him down, she needed a convincing justification.

At this hour, the sky was inching toward darkness. A line of servants bearing lanterns entered from the other side of the garden. Fuman had been excelling in his work recently, and his complexion was rosy. From afar, he spied Li Jianting standing by the pond. The junior eunuch at his side leaned in and whispered, "Zuzong, Fengquan is kneeling!"

Fuman flicked his horsetail whisk. "He earned himself quite a bit of merit at that banquet. As long as he knows his place, Her Highness will not make things difficult for him. But that temper of his really leaves much to be desired. It's no surprise if he's angered Her Highness over some trivial matter."

He scoffed quietly, then adjusted his expression and walked over, all smiles, to bow to Li Jianting in greeting.

"You're here." Li Jianting smiled as she acknowledged him. "Is something the matter?"

"This humble servant is always thinking of Your Highness." Fuman breezed right past Fengquan. Aware that Li Jianting did not like to be touched, he held out his arm as if to support her elbow down the steps without actually coming in contact with her. "I grew anxious when I didn't hear any news in the hall. Then I saw the clouds gathering on the horizon, and, fearing it would rain, I hurried over to bring an umbrella."

"You're indeed very thoughtful," Li Jianting said. "Thorough in every particular."

Fuman exclaimed in surprise, as if he had only just seen Fengquan on the ground. “Oh my, what happened here?”

The sky was silent and still. Standing there among the flickering shadows of the lanterns, Li Jianting was suddenly struck with an idea. Her expression went frosty as she said, “This arrogant and conceited thing. I heard he was disrespectful to the gentlemen while on duty in the hall, so I had him kneel here as a punishment.”

On hearing this, Fengquan sobbed harder and prostrated himself on the ground, looking precisely like someone who had just been reproved. “This humble servant was not discerning enough and offended the ministers. I deserve death for my mistakes, Your Highness.”

“I know you served as the Director of the Seal for the former emperor, but how can eunuchs stand next to the officials of the court? Those regional officials are here to report on their duties for the sake of the common people in their region. Their hard work wears on their bodies and minds. Who do you think you are to be showing them such attitude?”

The regional officials.

Understanding dawned on Fuman. No wonder Li Jianting was angry. The heir apparent had been tossing and turning the past several nights over the drought in Yongcheng. Expenditures inside and outside the palace were being cut, and the heir herself was eating inferior quality rice at every meal, citing a need to remember the hardships of the common folk. She plainly thought highly of the regional officials.

“Your Highness exhausts yourself discussing government affairs in court. Coming out to take a stroll in the garden is a rare moment of relaxation. You mustn’t let this put a damper on your mood.” Fuman guided Li Jianting away and said with an apologetic smile, “His Excellency Xue has also just arrived and is waiting for Your Highness in the hall.”

Fuman cast several glances back at Fengquan but said nothing to intercede on his behalf. Li Jianting kept her eyes fixed straight ahead as she walked away.

Once Fuman had served the tea for Li Jianting and withdrawn from Mingli Hall to wait under the eaves, he asked a junior eunuch nearby, “Still kneeling?”

The eunuch snickered and replied, “Still kneeling.”

“Tell him to get up.”

“Zuzong,” the junior eunuch began curiously, “isn’t he too proud? He’s always had a sharp tongue in his mouth. Why help him? Let him kneel until Her Highness is done with her meetings.”

“As servants, we must be of the same mind as our sovereign and relieve her burdens,” Fuman said. “He has served Her Highness for a long time and forged a bond with her. Her Highness only told him to kneel without really punishing him, which means she’s treating him with leniency. She’s forgotten him now, but later when she remembers and he cries again, her heart will soften toward him on account of their old ties. I didn’t plead on his behalf earlier. If I let him kneel any longer, Her Highness will reproach us instead for not knowing better.”

“Zuzong really does think of everything,” the junior eunuch said in admiration. “You’ve always been able to read the masters’ minds. Truly brilliant! I’ll tell him to rise right away.”

Fuman looked back toward the dim golden candlelight spilling from the door of Mingli Hall and smiled smugly.

Without that old dog Han Cheng around, there was no leverage left that anyone could use against him. He only had to serve the heir apparent well and obtain the Grand Secretariat’s recommendation, and he would enjoy a meteoric rise. Whatever Pan Rugui could do, he could too—except that he would do an even better and even more beautiful job of it.

Fuman turned his gaze away. The only issue was that the empress dowager was still around. Who knew when she might expose him? To eliminate future trouble, he would have to make his move as soon as possible.

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Chapter 257:
Tea Talk

WHILE SHEN ZECHUAN was bedridden, Xiao Chiye remained in Duanzhou. In the second half of the month, the Biansha Horsemen's attacks in the north abated, and Lu Guangbai rode south to meet him.

"Looks like the battle here was a tough one. It'll take time just to repair these city walls," Lu Guangbai said as he dismounted. "Jiming dispatched some craftsmen south with us."

Xiao Chiye had come out to meet him dressed in his day robes. "Dage thinks of everything." He paused in surprise as he caught sight of a carriage at the back of the procession. "Sister-in-Law is here!"

A maidservant lifted the carriage curtain, and Lu Yizhi, handkerchief clutched in her hand, poked her head out.

Lu Guangbai smiled. "Xun-er is here too."

Lu Yizhi disembarked her carriage with the help of her maidservant. "I've been thinking about Lanzhou back at home, so I came to see him."

Xiao Chiye stepped up to receive her. "Lanzhou misses you too."

Looking up at the city walls of Duanzhou, Lu Yizhi continued, "Now that Zhongbo's victory is secured, Lanzhou ought to rest and let his injuries heal properly." She turned her head aside and smiled. "I brought Xun-er along to keep him company."

Xiao Xun followed his mother without needing anyone to hold him by the hand. He bowed to Xiao Chiye. "Er-shu—"[5]

Xiao Chiye swept his nephew up in a flash and held him aloft for a closer look. "This kid's gotten taller."

"He's just like you as a child." Lu Guangbai handed his riding crop to Chen Yang. "He drinks his milk on time every day, and he's always worrying he won't grow any taller. I asked him what wish he made on New Year's, and he said he wants to be as tall as his second uncle when he grows

up." He pinched Xiao Xun's expressionless cheek. "Boys take after their maternal uncles, so you can forget about it. You're taking after me."

"You're good too," Xiao Xun said in a piping voice, holding Xiao Chiye's arm for support as he dangled in the air. "Magnanimous of heart, and not given to embellishment. You're a scholar-general."[6]

The trio laughed, and Lu Guangbai sighed. "You're talking about me, but it sounds more like you're praising your father."

There were now many children in the residence. Ding Tao and Li Xiong still had Jiran with them. Xiao Chiye carried Xiao Xun in, but before long, Xiao Xun kicked his feet and demanded to be put down—he wanted to see Shen Zechuan. Xiao Xun was particularly fond of Shen Zechuan, so much so that he refused to hold anyone's hand but Shen Zechuan's during the New Year's festivities.

Shen Zechuan's legs were injured, so he received their guests at the top of the steps. They proceeded into the house and exchanged pleasantries, whereupon Lu Yizhi took Xiao Xun to pay their respects to Ji Gang.

When Lu Yizhi had gone, Shen Zechuan turned to Lu Guangbai. "Now that the war on the northern front has eased, General Lu must be here to talk to me on Dage's behalf."

Lu Guangbai picked up his teacup and laughed as he lifted the lid. He cast a glance at Xiao Chiye, then at Shen Zechuan. "Your Lordship is a heroic man who never forgets his business even for a moment. That's right. Jiming sent me with a message for you. Hassen is dead, the crisis in Duanzhou has been averted, and the Youxiong tribe in the south has been defeated. It's the perfect opportunity to go on the offensive."

"With Hassen dead, Amur's status as Great Hero of the desert will have taken a blow," Xiao Chiye said. "I'm guessing Dage intends to seize the opportunity to hit back and put him down for good."

"Two brothers with one mind." Lu Guangbai sipped his tea. "So you were thinking the same."

Xiao Chiye was sitting by the window. He turned his thumb ring and glanced back toward the others; the angle exposed his throat to the dim light. "Amur has maintained the stability of the tribes under his banner all this time because the men of the Hanma tribe are brave and capable

warriors. But last year, the Hanma tribe's best soldiers were all sent to the battlefield. Now, after a year of war, the Hanma have been pressed to their limits; they're not the deterrent to the other tribes that they were before. Now Hassen is dead, and Amur has lost his right arm. If we don't strike now, then when?"

"If you want to strike out east into the desert, you'll need the cooperation of all three armies," Lu Guangbai said. "Marshal Qi is still subject to Qudu's deployment orders. It won't be easy."

Xiao Jiming and Lu Guangbai both shared a personal friendship with Qi Zhuyin. If Lu Guangbai had to come all the way to Duanzhou to discuss tactics with Shen Zechuan, then this was something friendship alone couldn't resolve. Qi Zhuyin's last few deployments had all been to assist Libei, but now, more than half the Biansha Horsemen had retreated, and the Youxiong tribe in the south had been driven into the desert. She had no reason to follow Libei's lead this time.

"The Ministry of War agreed to let Marshal Qi deploy troops to Gedal because Chen Zhen and the other veteran ministers are keenly aware that Libei's crisis has direct bearing on Qudu's safety. Now that Gedal is no longer a threat," Lu Guangbai said, setting down his teacup, "it will be a different story."

In refusing to hand over the Qingshu tribe's territory to Haerigu, Qi Zhuyin was also putting a temporary halt to the war. It hadn't been easy for her to borrow the grain she needed, and whatever she had borrowed from Shen Zechuan would one day have to be paid back. If she left the debts to accumulate over time, it would sooner or later leave a bad taste in her mouth. Qidong had been at war all year, and half their military fields had been neglected. The troops had been forced to depend on the imperial court and Shen Zechuan simply to get through the winter, never mind the extra food they needed to wage a war. It would have been one thing if Qidong merely had civilians to feed like Hezhou, but Qidong had the garrison troops to worry about as well. She held both power and responsibility in her hands; she couldn't afford to be slipshod.

"Marshal Qi is the Li Clan's grand marshal. If she keeps aiding rebels, she will be accused of conspiring against the state," Shen Zechuan said, running his fingers along the wooden frame of his fan. "When Qidong

dispatched troops to fight the Qingshu tribe, there were already impeachment memorials submitted in the court. If Marshal Qi joins forces with Libei to venture into the desert, Qudu will have the perfect excuse to dismiss her from her post."

Qi Zhuyin's refusal to turn over Lu Pingyan for questioning when he was implicated in Lu Guangbai's desertion had already earned her censure from the imperial court. The imperial censors had no good opinion of her. Qi Shiyu had married Hua Xiangyi to preserve Qidong's military power; the empress dowager might have fallen, but this tie remained. And though Qi Zhuyin had helped Li Jianting kill Han Cheng in Qudu, even this could be interpreted as either loyalty or treachery, depending on who was speaking.

Shen Zechuan's eyes were milder than usual in his illness, as if his sharp edges had been sanded away. "The heir apparent is about to ascend the throne. If Xue Xiuzhuo has his way, Marshal Qi will be rewarded with a noble title." He sipped his tea, looking for all the world as though he was idly chatting about some anecdote from the countryside. "Let's wait and see. If the heir apparent does not begrudge her this, she'll be doing us a great favor."

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Chapter 258:
Small Fish

THE HEIR APPARENT had led all the officials to pray for rain, but rain never fell upon Yongcheng. Jiang Qingshan scoured the countryside trying to raise grain, while Liang Cuishan continued to audit the Chuancheng accounts. Meanwhile, so frightened had the Helian Marquis been by Han Cheng's death that he took to his bed with illness, remaining hidden in his residence.

"We can't risk giving them the runaround on these accounts." The Helian Marquis sighed with distress as he lay surrounded by cushions. "And Her Majesty the empress dowager is confined in the inner palace. Heaven wants my clan to perish!"

Fei Shi, the young marquis, had also received quite the scare during the banquet. He, too, dared not casually step out of doors. From his place keeping watch by his father's bedside, he complained, "Why did you have to embezzle so much money? All that silver—making it up would be impossible even if we wanted to."

"How can you blame me? Who have I done all this for?" The Helian Marquis was in tears. With difficulty, he propped himself up and pointed at Fei Shi. "Had you not fallen so short of expectations, would I need to go around begging all those favors? Look at yourself—you're accomplished in neither civil nor martial pursuits. Even if you inherit the title of marquis, you'll just be idling around waiting for death. If I don't pull what strings I can, what will become of our clan?"

"Yes, yes, you're right." Hearing his father gasping for breath, Fei Shi hurriedly helped him lie down again. "I'm a rascal. I'm stupid. Don't go making yourself faint from anger."

Lying there with tears streaming down his face, the Helian Marquis clutched at his chest and composed himself. "If the court comes to seize our estates—I don't even dare to think about it…"

Commandery Princess Zhaoyue, a mourning-white flower tucked in her hair, sat nearby, holding her child in her arms. She had been home since her divorce and had grown frail after hearing of the demise of the Pan Clan. She handed the child to the wet nurse and motioned for the servants to leave them alone.

"If you knew it would come to this, would you have been so—ah, it's too late for regrets now." Zhaoyue's almond eyes were rimmed red. "Those accounts have led to the death of so many people."

"It's true. There have indeed been deaths," the Helian Marquis lamented. "But without those accounts, how could you have married into the Pan Clan? That prestige and honor were all given to you by our clan's wealth. When the Hua Clan was at the height of its power, Hua Siqian lorded over the whole realm. We were under his thumb; we had no choice but to throw in our lot with them. After Hua Siqian's death, I hoped Shi-er could obtain an official post and at the very least have a say in the imperial court. But he's always fooling around. I was left with no choice!"

The Fei Clan of Chuancheng had very few male offspring. Fei Shi was their sole descendant of lawful birth. If the Helian Marquis didn't plan for their future, they would end up no better than the Xue Clan. Yet even the declining Xue Clan had produced a Xue Xiuzhuo. In contrast, the Fei Clan was completely without talented men.

Remembering this, the Helian Marquis sat up again. "What's the name of that child who used to serve in the Embroidered Uniform Guard?"

"You mean Fei Sheng?" Fei Shi offered.

"Right, right! Fei Sheng. It was all because I vouched for him that he could inherit his father's position, and it was also on my account that Han Cheng promoted him. But the little rat fled with Xiao Chiye, and now he's serving Shen Zechuan in Zhongbo!"

The color drained from Fei Shi's face. "Those are rebels! Association with him is punishable by death."

"There's no way we can dig ourselves out of this hole." The Helian Marquis's voice rose. "Not only will we be stripped of our properties and our noble title, our whole clan might be beheaded! Look at the Pan Clan. How many of them are left alive? Even if they were banished to the

borderlands, they would still conveniently die before they reached their destinations." The longer he spoke, the more disheartened he became. "We might as well switch allegiance to Zhongbo. Even Tao Ming of Huaizhou has defected…"

Fei Shi sat stunned. He'd been born in a nest of gold and silver, and what was more, he was a young marquis, due to inherit his father's title. He had always been a loyal subject of Great Zhou, yet now his father was suggesting throwing in with the traitors and rebels? The very idea was absurd. After sitting in a daze for a while, he said, "No. How can I be a traitor? Chengzhi never betrayed his country; he died loyal to Great Zhou. He and I were bosom friends. I could never do such an unrighteous thing. Besides, Shen Zechuan is a vicious and ruthless man who holds grudges, while Fei Sheng merely craves fame and power. No, this won't do."

"What good is loyalty and righteousness in the face of imminent destruction?" The Helian Marquis huffed in irritation. "You refused to apply yourself to your studies, but somehow you learned all of Pan Lin's bookish dogmatism!"

"In any case, I'm not leaving," Fei Shi said, bullheaded. "At the end of the day, you are a marquis. I don't believe the Grand Secretariat will lay their hands on you."

"Why wouldn't they?" Zhaoyue dabbed at her tears. "Without the empress dowager to stop it, the heir apparent will investigate and deal with us in strict accordance with the law. Once the memorandum from the Grand Secretariat is issued, seizing our estates and chopping off our heads will be no more than a night's work." She thought again of Pan Yi and covered her face to weep. "That was what happened to the Pan Clan."

"Look at your sister. She still has her child to think of." Tears ran down the Helian Marquis's face. "Can you truly bear to see your elderly father executed, your dear sister banished and set to slave labor, the whole family in mass graves?"

"But we can't just leave either." Zhaoyue looked up and wiped her tears. "Shi-er is right. When Fei Sheng was in the Embroidered Uniform Guard, he was already a master at currying favor with those in authority. He only thinks of his own gain. There'll be no moving him unless you can offer him sufficient benefits. Father, please hear me out. Yongcheng is suffering a

drought, and Jiang Qingshan is in Qudu begging for grain, while Tao Ming has fled. The imperial court is in a predicament. Why not sell off our country estates and use the money to acquire grain for the imperial court?"

"But there is no grain to buy right now," the Helian Marquis replied. "I couldn't purchase any even if I had the money."

"Father, buy it back from whomever you sold it to." Zhaoyue tucked away her handkerchief. "As for Fei Sheng, we'll discuss him again if the need truly arises."

A few days later, the servants of Mingli Hall replaced its ice basins. Li Jianting sat inside reading memorials, while Fuman, bent at the waist, gently fanned her.

"Your Highness has been reading for two hours," Fuman said softly. "Please take a break."

Li Jianting closed the memorial. Before she could speak, Fuman turned to call, "Bring in the chilled sour prune soup—Your Highness, it's so warm today. Please have some to dispel the heat."

Fuman had been in Li Jianting's good graces lately. She still seemed angry with Fengquan and kept only Fuman by her side to serve her. Fuman was naturally delighted. In the past, he would never have dared to speak on behalf of the heir apparent, but after several probing overtures, she hadn't reproached him for being presumptuous, so he grew increasingly bold.

While Li Jianting wiped her hands, Fuman tidied the desk for her. Li Jianting watched him arranging the memorials neatly, sorting them by regions and ministries, and asked, "Why have you placed this memorial from Ming Zang with the Grand Secretary's? From what I remember, they are not from the same hometown."

"They are teacher and pupil, Your Highness." Fuman beamed. "The Grand Secretary was the one who selected Lord Ming for promotion."

Kong Qiu currently held the post of Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat. The number of officials from the various ministries he evaluated during reviews was too numerous to cite. As per custom, all of these officials could address him as *Teacher*. It hadn't been long since Li Jianting

had taken over government affairs, so she had indeed been unaware of this connection. There were so many officials in the capital that unless she paid particular attention to them, it was difficult for her to remember each and every one.

At present, Fuman was merely serving before the throne. After the heir's coronation, he could very possibly become the Director of Writ who wielded the vermilion-ink brush on the emperor's behalf and commented on memorials. But Li Jianting was not the powerless Xiande Emperor—she personally managed government affairs. Moreover, she was young and energetic, and did not need eunuchs to handle such essential functions on her behalf. In memorizing all of these political relationships regardless, Fuman was revealing his own ambition.

Understanding dawned on Li Jianting. "You know more than I do."

Fuman was slightly taken aback. Reacting quickly, he protested, "This humble servant doesn't dare interfere in the affairs of the imperial court. The Grand Secretary once mentioned this connection in the office compound when I was serving, and this humble servant remembered it."

"It's a good thing." Li Jianting's expression was amiable. "I can never remember these details. I'll be counting on you to remind me in the future."

Her words were mild and polite, no different from usual. As he reached over to gather up the soup bowl, Fuman stole a glance at Li Jianting. He was relieved to find a smile on the heir apparent's face. He added, "It's this humble servant's great fortune to share Your Highness's worries."

"Have the gentlemen arrived?" Li Jianting asked. "If so, let them in."

Kong Qiu, Xue Xiuzhuo, and the rest gathering outside Mingli Hall entered upon hearing the summons. They kowtowed and greeted her in unison. "These humble subjects pay their respects to Your Highness."

"You are all my teachers." Li Jianting gestured for Fuman to help Kong Qiu up. "There's no need for the Grand Secretary to be so solicitous when entering the hall. It is I who ought to pay my respects to you as a student."

Kong Qiu took his seat and smiled. “Your Highness is no longer merely my student. There is no need for the formalities between teacher and pupil. Mingli Hall is a place where affairs of state are handled. Here, there is only a ruler and her ministers. This humble subject dares not overstep.”

Li Jianting studied Kong Qiu’s face and couldn’t help smiling. “You bring good news today.”

Kong Qiu was reticent, experienced, and above all prudent. He rarely exhibited such visible joy. Sure enough, his next words were: “Jiang Qingshan reported this morning that all the relief grain for Yongcheng has been assembled.”

“So soon?” Li Jianting was delighted as well. “Was it borrowed from Hezhou?”

“It was the Helian Marquis.” The elation faded slightly from Kong Qiu’s expression. “He knows there are discrepancies in his field tax accounts. In the hope that Your Highness will be lenient with him, he sold his country estates and purchased the grain of his own accord to help the common folks of Yongcheng.”

The details of the Chuancheng field tax case were tacitly understood by all involved. The imperial court wanted to recover the arrears and even resurvey the fertile lands to return them to the commoners. No doubt the Helian Marquis would have to bear responsibility and receive punishment for this. Now, the Grand Secretariat would have to take his contribution into account.

Xue Xiuzhuo spoke up. “As they say, one may not bargain with the law. Your Highness must not allow miscreants to think they can get away with misdeeds and bribe their way out. In this humble subject’s opinion”—here he knelt before the heir—“the Helian Marquis must be investigated and punished according to the law, even if he has furnished grain for Yongcheng.”

“When all is said and done,” Cen Yu argued, “we are investigating the field taxes to restore the livelihoods of people in the eight cities. If the Helian Marquis is willing to raise grain for the city of Yongcheng, it means he is repentant. Her Highness must also govern with mercy and benevolence. We are talking about punishing the Fei Clan by seizing their

properties and taking their lives. Adhering too strictly to the law may lose her the favor of the people."

Cen Yu was a senior minister, one who hailed from common origins. His attempt to preserve the life of the Helian Marquis was solely for Li Jianting's sake. The Helian Marquis had produced grain for disaster relief; no matter what transpired after, he would now have a reputation for generosity in Yongcheng. If Li Jianting insisted on the harshest punishments the law allowed, then she would be showing the remaining noble clans that the only path left for them was to fight her to the bitter end.

When they had first begun to investigate the Dancheng accounts, Cen Yu had repeatedly advised Kong Qiu to slow down. Now, after Shen Zechuan's resounding victory in Duanzhou, all six prefectures were under his command. Once the war in Libei ended, Qudu would undoubtedly be his next target.

As the saying went, perseverance yielded success—enough drops of water could wear down a stone. The noble clans were a deeply rooted malady in the body of the empire; their downfall could not be rushed. If rashly excising them brought harm to the heart of the nation, how would they have the strength to deal with Zhongbo?

Besides, the resurveying of commoners' fields in Dancheng necessarily meant a reaudit of the census register to make sure all lands were properly allocated. If the imperial court wanted to focus on treating this internal rot, they first had to avert the external threat.

"The court gave the noble clans latitude during the reign of Xiande," Xue Xiuzhuo protested. "Look what happened then—the eight cities went from bad to worse. These benevolent policies are what led to the reselling of public grain in the first place. If we don't punish one as an example, how can we deter the rest from continuing their crimes?"

"The state is now in imminent peril." Cen Yu knelt too. "Libei and Zhongbo have revolted one after another, and rebels have assembled in the countryside. Shen Zechuan—"

"It is precisely because the state is in imminent peril that we must strictly enforce the integrity of the court," Xue Xiuzhuo cut in, kowtowing heavily. "If we let the noble clans continue to drain our strength, how can we revitalize the empire?"

Cen Yu raised his head and said earnestly, “The lifesaving medicine has already been administered. The Pan, Han, Hua, and Wei clans have collapsed, and the grip of the noble clans on Qudu is not the vise it used to be. If we do not eliminate the threats at our borders now, they will grow to be great catastrophes. Your Highness, governing a large state is like cooking a small fish—you must not disrupt too much, or everything will fall apart!”[7]

Li Jianting sat in quiet contemplation.

Waves of heat shimmered in the courtyard outside the hall. Inside, the silence was almost eerie. The quiet was only interrupted when a junior eunuch hurried up the steps and made his way under the eaves of the hall to whisper something in Fengquan’s ear.

“Your Highness!” The beaded curtain swung wildly as Fengquan raced through with the announcement. “Her Majesty the empress dowager is critically ill!”

Everyone in the hall turned pale.

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Chapter 259:
Rumors

WHEN LI JIANTING ARRIVED, she saw that the imperial physician attending to the empress dowager had prostrated himself on the ground in panic. Aunt Liuxiang was kneeling beside the bed. She grasped the empress dowager's hand and called softly, "The heir apparent is here."

The empress dowager's breathing was labored as she glanced sidelong at Li Jianting. She was sweating profusely, and her bare face was lined with wrinkles, finally betraying her old age. Her voice was feeble. "I…want to speak to…Her Highness."

Aunt Liuxiang rose and retreated with the attendants, giving them privacy.

The drapes in the hall were pinned up on both sides. The fragrant scent of incense wafted from the small Buddhist shrine. Wisps of smoke obscured the statue, rendering its compassionate expression indistinct. Li Jianting bent to pick up the string of prayer beads that had fallen to the rug and caught a whiff of rich sandalwood.

"Ever since you set up that banquet to kill Han Cheng…" The empress dowager's hair, left loose around her shoulders, shifted as she turned to look at her. "I knew…you wouldn't tolerate me…either."

"Even if I had the heart to do it, I too am powerless." Li Jianting turned the prayer beads in her hand. "Fuman's hasty action today makes it clear Your Majesty has lost the support of all. I fear this is the end of your road."

The empress dowager's chest heaved, but she forced herself to smile. Her gaze seemed to pass through Li Jianting. "You are indeed…the Guangcheng Emperor's daughter… How laughable your Li Clan is. Had you been a son…"

"Had I been a son, I wouldn't have lived to this day." Grasping the prayer beads tighter, Li Jianting took a seat on the edge of the bed. "You yourself killed all the men of the Li Clan."

Even with her sweat-damp hair stuck to her cheeks, the empress dowager still retained a ghost of her unsurpassed beauty from those bygone years. Her lips quivered. “Who would have thought he could be so ruthless? He would rather commit the sin of incest and leave me such a scourge…” Mirth brimming in her eyes, she continued, “He was the one…who forced Prince Qin to his death…”

“You killed your husband and your sons to get to where you are today. You could have forged a new path as a sovereign never before seen in history, yet instead you handed power and authority to someone else. You placed your trust in the eunuchs and allowed them to undermine court politics; you favored and helped your eldest brother, Hua Siqian, and bolstered the influence and arrogance of the powerful ministers. Now the state stands on the brink of collapse, and you are to blame.”

The smile in the empress dowager’s eyes gradually dimmed. She stared at Li Jianting. “It’s lonely at the top. You don’t understand… I am a floating weed on the river, with no one to depend on.”

“A floating weed…” Li Jianting repeated. There was no sorrow on her face, nor was there any joy. She looked away, her gaze gliding past the drapes before settling on the empress dowager’s dressing table. Fixing her eyes on the polished bronze mirror there, she said, “If you were not bold enough to fight the current of precedent and tradition, then why stir up such great waves to grasp at power?”

“You are a woman too,” the empress dowager said. “How do you not understand me?”

“I am neither a woman nor a man.” Li Jianting swung her gaze back to the empress dowager, her eyes clear and bright. “I am merely Li Jianting.”

The empress dowager was at a loss. After a while, she said, “When I see you, I recall how regal an emperor of the Li Clan is… But you, too, are under the control of another.”

“This game lies not in any one man’s hands, but in all the mountains and rivers of the empire,” Li Jianting said softly. “Those who think they are directing the board are merely late to the game.”

The empress dowager's breathing grew fainter, and so did her voice. "Poor Xue Xiuzhuo. For all his scheming and plotting…" She widened her eyes slightly and murmured, "The mountains and rivers…"

The last rays of the evening sun faded into shadow outside the palace. A scattering of birds sailed across the blue sky. A petal dropped from a peony leaning precariously out of a vase and landed on the dressing table, where a nudge of the wind sent it on its way.

The news from Qudu was urgently dispatched to Qidong. Hooves thundered through the night, and a messenger arrived at the Bianjun Commandery only a few days later.

Hua Xiangyi had yet to retire for the day. Spotting Qi Wei coming in with the relay report, she asked with a smile, "Is my aunt's letter here too?"

Qi Wei paused at the threshold, his expression odd.

Sensing something amiss, Hua Xiangyi slowly got up. "Has she fallen ill?"

Qi Wei looked at his boots to avoid her gaze. "My lady, Her Majesty…has passed."

Hua Xiangyi stumbled back, and her maidservant Hongying rushed forward to support her. She looked dazedly at Qi Wei, tears already flowing down her face. Gripping Hongying's arm for support, she took a few steps toward the door and said in a hoarse voice, "Don't lie to me."

Qi Wei was silent.

Hua Xiangyi covered her mouth with her handkerchief as her shoulders began to shake. "How…how could this be…?"

Before Qi Wei could answer, Hongying cried, "My lady!"

Hua Xiangyi, already sinking heavily against her, had fainted.

The scent of calming incense filled the tent. When Hua Xiangyi awoke, Qi Zhuyin was sitting in the chair at her bedside, peeling an apple. Seeing Hua Xiangyi's lashes flutter, she set the knife on a small table and

wiped her hands before touching Hua Xiangyi's forehead. "You collapsed. You didn't even know you were sick."

Hua Xiangyi's lips were pale. She kept her eyes closed, her tears soaking the pillow beneath her cheek.

Qi Zhuyin had never been good at consoling others. At the sight of her weeping, Qi Zhuyin rushed to dry her tears with the handkerchief. Only when she was done did she belatedly remember this was the same handkerchief she had used a moment ago to wipe her hands. Hua Xiangyi turned away, curled in on herself, and sobbed inconsolably. She cried until she was exhausted, then fell asleep in the same position.

When she woke up again, Qi Zhuyin was still in the chair.

"News travels slowly," Qi Zhuyin said. "The new emperor will ascend the throne soon. I'll escort you back."

"Now that Auntie is gone, there is no place in Qudu I want to return to." Hua Xiangyi blinked her swollen eyes. "When we parted, she was in good health. It has only been two months. How has she passed away from illness?"

Qi Zhuyin was silent for a spell. "I promised you we'd let her live."

"The marshal is far away in the Bianjun Commandery. Your power is limited," Hua Xiangyi said. "The inner palace is not like the imperial court. The dangers there are invisible. Even the Grand Secretary's reach does not extend there."

Qi Zhuyin thought Hua Xiangyi was going to say more, but she stopped and propped herself up. "You're busy with military affairs, Marshal. You don't need to stay here."

Hua Xiangyi's face was wan. Her pale wrists were soaked in frosty moonlight, and her eyes were downcast. It was true that Qi Zhuyin couldn't linger here; she felt around her sleeve for a small scented pouch and set it on Hua Xiangyi's lap.

By now, the night was drawing to a close. "Hongying is waiting at the door." Qi Zhuyin rose to her feet. "I'll be in the side hall."

Hongying heard Hua Xiangyi's summons at the crack of dawn. The maidservant sent someone to the kitchen to fetch breakfast while she headed inside.

"Bring my chest over," Hua Xiangyi said.

Hongying went to the cabinet and retrieved the chest she indicated. Hua Xiangyi unlocked it, then instructed Hongying to bring her a copper basin. She lit a fire and began feeding the account books in the chest into it one by one.

"My lady, what are you doing?" Anxious, Hongying moved to stop her. "These are all accounts you went to painstaking effort to calculate!"

"The heir apparent promised Marshal Qi she wouldn't kill my aunt." Hua Xiangyi released the last book from her slender fingers and watched as the fire gradually devoured it. "If she didn't do it, then she's incompetent. If she did, then she's untrustworthy."

The breeze ruffled the pages, scattering ash over the ground.

The night in Duanzhou was cool, and the courtyard was filled with flowers and trees. To dispel the mosquitoes that gathered around the plants, Fei Sheng lit incense under the newly erected pergola. The ice in Shen Zechuan's bowl clattered when he stirred it. He watched Xiao Chiye teach Xiao Xun how to draw a bow as he listened to Fei Sheng report the news from Qudu.

"If Xue Xiuyi wants that post in charge of the palace depository, he'll have to win over the eunuchs. The eunuchs in the palace are fond of the imported goods from the Port of Yongyi. Have Qingqing prepare something."

"Qingqing says he's done so already. When the new emperor ascends the throne, she's bound to grant a general amnesty, and posts in the court may be reshuffled. When the time comes, Xue Xiuyi may get his chance to make a name for himself," Fei Sheng said. "With the empress dowager's demise, the noble clans are in a precarious position. The Helian Marquis may stand the best chance of coming out unscathed—he sold his estates to buy grain, so the Grand Secretariat may be lenient with him."

"The fact that the Helian Marquis even thought of buying grain merely shows that he's been backed into a corner. He has no choice but to sacrifice what he can and start fresh." Shen Zechuan sipped the chilled soup. "In letting him buy that grain, I've already done what I can."

The grain the Helian Marquis had bought with his family assets had come from You Tan, the prefect of Liuzhou in Juexi. Back when Shen Zechuan had taken Yan Heru's suggestion to build a new port, You Tan had been their inside man in Juexi. This prefect was especially greedy. As long as he was paid enough, he'd do anything, even if it could cost him his head. Otherwise he wouldn't have been dealing with Yan Heru right under Jiang Qingshan's nose.

"Xue Xiuzhuo is too radical. If Zhongbo were still battling Biansha, Kong Qiu and Cen Yu might have agreed to it. But now my hands are free." Shen Zechuan's eyes danced with points of light, reflecting the fireflies nearby. "Of course they no longer wish to fight to the death with the noble clans. Joining forces to confront their enemy—us—is their priority now. Unless the heir apparent is a fool, she will pardon the Helian Marquis."

"Then why are we giving the Helian Marquis grain?"

Not only was the grain Shen Zechuan bade You Tan sell to the Helian Marquis offered at a fair price, it was good-quality rice.

"It's for a good cause. We should certainly help with the relief grain." Shen Zechuan looked at Fei Sheng. "All we have to do is let You Tan tell the truth."

Understanding dawned on Fei Sheng. He laughed. "Master is wise!"

On the other side of the courtyard, Xiao Chiye released the string, and the arrow buried itself in the bullseye. Chen Yang and the other guards cheered.

"Er-ye's arm strength is really something," Fei Sheng said.

Shen Zechuan watched Xiao Chiye for a few more moments before speaking again. "Elder Yin's funeral arrangements are all settled. As for his remaining possessions…you're the son, so you decide."

"What decent thing could he possibly have? Better to throw away all those scruffy mats and tattered blankets. He'd probably scold me if I burned

them as offerings to him." Fei Sheng laid a hand on the hilt of the blade hanging at his waist. "I'll just keep this. This saber is nameless, as was he."

"Elder Yin is a hero," Shen Zechuan said. "That blade ought to have a name."

"He and I both took you as our master." Fei Sheng grasped the blade. "I'd like Master to give it a name."

Shen Zechuan turned the porcelain bowl in his hand. Moonlight glinted across its edge, rendering it bright as snow. "A banner of ten thousand to slay Yanluo, the King of Hell. Let's name it Hellslayer."[8]

Fei Sheng lifted the hem of his robe and knelt, proclaiming, "This blade shall not fail its name!"

After the passing of the empress dowager, the heir apparent's coronation could be delayed no further. The Grand Secretariat made the arrangements, fixing the date for the beginning of the eighth month, right on the heels of the empress dowager's funeral. They selected the regnal title Shengyin—*prosperity for posterity*.

When Xiao Chiye heard the news, he remarked, "The heir apparent has drive and spirit."

When the day arrived, Kong Qiu led the officials of the court to kowtow before Mingli Hall and make obeisance to the new emperor. At last, Li Jianting was the recognized sovereign of the Zhou empire.

"Guess what noble rank the new emperor is going to bestow upon Marshal Qi." Shen Zechuan had been spending his days cooped up in the manor playing with Xiao Xun. Since Xiao Chiye was here now, he teased him instead. "There's a prize for the right answer."

"What's the prize?" Xiao Chiye said, reading over military reports as Shen Zechuan reclined against his back. "It has to be worth my time."

Shen Zechuan trailed his folding fan across the letter as he read, finding it quite comfortable to lean on Xiao Chiye like this. "Anything."

"Marquis." Xiao Chiye caught Shen Zechuan's hand and turned it over to look at the scar there. "Qudu will remember the Prince of Libei's ferocious rise over the lands. They will not confer a Prince of Qidong."

Lu Pingyan of the Bianjun Commandery was already the Marquis of Biansha. Qi Zhuyin was the grand marshal of the five commanderies' troops. They would be remiss to put her on equal footing with Lu Pingyan. But since the reign of Yongyi, the Zhou empire had conferred the title of prince to only two people outside of the Li Clan: One was Xiao Fangxu, the Prince of Libei, and the other was Shen Wei, the Prince of Jianxing. Qi Zhuyin's military achievements weren't on par with her father Qi Shiyu's, and the imperial censors had taken a poor view of her attitude in recent years; her conferment was already beset with difficulties. Weighing the available options, it would be most appropriate to confer her with the title and rank of marquis.

"Then I will guess prince," Shen Zechuan murmured into Xiao Chiye's ear. "If I win, you have to give me a reward."

Fuman had just changed into a fresh robe. As he strode toward Mingli Hall, the eunuchs and palace maids along the way all paused to pay their respects to him. He wanted to puff up with pride at his accomplishment, but he never forgot his place; he retreated each time he encountered a minister of the court, making himself even more humble and deferential than usual.

When he arrived at Mingli Hall, the junior eunuch at the door whispered, "Her Majesty has just woken up. She's asking for you."

Fuman patted his sleeves and strode in. He took the tea tray from the palace maid and presented it to Li Jianting. "Your Majesty."

Li Jianting often slept poorly. Pinching the center of her brows, she accepted the tea from Fuman and took a sip. "What did the Grand Secretary say?"

"This is the Grand Secretary's memorandum. Please take a look." Fuman produced the Grand Secretariat's note from within his sleeve and presented it to the imperial desk. "If Your Majesty agrees, it can be sent out tonight."

Li Jianting read the memorandum Kong Qiu had drafted and pondered for a while. "Our predecessor made Lu Pingyan a marquis too. If we confer the same title on Qi Zhuyin, we risk incurring Qidong's displeasure."

Li Jianting often spoke to Fuman about government affairs, and so Fuman never shied away from them either. He repeated what he had heard in the Grand Secretariat's office compound, embellishing only slightly. "Since Lu Guangbai defected, if Lu Pingyan had been taken to Qudu, he would have been stripped of his noble rank. His Marquis of Biansha title would no longer stand. Your Majesty is the new emperor, and Marshal Qi is a new subject of yours. Raising her to the rank of marquis is already an immense grace."

"You have a point." Li Jianting set the note on the table. "Then let's —"

Fuman was already bending to prepare the ink when an attendant announced Kong Qiu's arrival. Li Jianting set the paper aside and summoned him in.

Kong Qiu's face was ashen as he lifted the hem of his robe and sank to his knees. After he kowtowed and paid his respects, he said gravely, "Your Majesty, it's about the relief grain sent to Yongcheng. A memorial from Juexi just came in. This humble subject dared not tarry!"

Fuman stepped up to accept the memorial Kong Qiu held out and placed it before Li Jianting.

The moment Li Jianting opened it, her heart sank.

"Rumors are flying in Yongcheng. Everyone is saying with certainty that Shen Zechuan of Zhongbo has provided them secret aid, and that the grain came from him. The word is spreading far and wide." Kong Qiu looked up. "If we let this go unchecked, I fear—"

"If we stop the distribution of the relief grain now, it will only confirm Shen Zechuan's involvement."

Qudu had no grain. This rice was the only source of relief for the drought-stricken Yongcheng. Li Jianting couldn't let the common folk of Yongcheng starve to death. But as Kong Qiu said, they could not let this lie. As the saying went, it only took three men to make a tiger—a rumor would take on the weight of truth after only a few repetitions. At that point, Shen Zechuan would've played the imperial court for fools and made himself the savior of Yongcheng.

The move was underhanded and ruthless. Li Jianting finally got a first-hand taste of the schemes of the overlord of Zhongbo.

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Chapter 260:
Conferment and Reward

"REWARD THE HELIAN MARQUIS." The gears in Li Jianting's mind whirred as she shut the memorial. "He's made significant contributions in the furnishing of grain. We must reward him handsomely."

Still prostrating, Kong Qiu nodded approvingly to himself. "Your Majesty is wise."

Whatever the truth was, the relief grain couldn't be taken back. As long as Li Jianting rewarded the Helian Marquis now, the rumors would die on their own. If Shen Zechuan wanted to fight a war of benevolence and righteousness with her, then they would see who emerged the victor.

"Han Cheng accumulated power for himself and attempted to force his sovereign's hand. He demonstrated intent to usurp the throne. His crimes are too heinous to be pardoned," Li Jianting said. "To ensure our safety, Grand Marshal Qi apprehended the Han traitor on our behalf—an impressive achievement in itself. Furthermore, she mobilized the troops against the Qingshu tribe and won a resounding victory for the nation. For both private and public reasons, we must bestow upon her a title."

"Marshal Qi has long suffered the harsh conditions and bitter cold at our borders," Kong Qiu said. "Since the reign of Xiande, she has earned herself many merits for coming to the aid of the throne. What title does Your Majesty intend to confer upon her?"

"We've heard the grand marshal is known for her reputation as the Windstorm through the Scorching Plains." Li Jianting picked up her brush and wrote two neat characters on the paper before her. "Why not bestow upon her the title Prince of Donglie—the 'scorching east'?"

Kong Qiu's head shot up. "But…that's…"

"Qi Zhuyin has thrice stepped out of Qidong to come to the throne's aid. Years ago, she set fire to the thirteen camps of Biansha and drove deep into enemy territory to save her father. Since she assumed the post of the grand marshal of Qidong's five commanderies, the border between the two

passes has been an impenetrable fortress. From the reign of Xiande to Tianchen, not a single soldier from Biansha has managed to penetrate our territory in Qidong." Li Jianting looked up. "Why shouldn't such a loyal, steadfast, and valiant general receive the title of prince?"

"But Marshal Qi is a woman," Kong Qiu replied. "It's already against custom for her to set foot on Jade Dragon Terrace to present herself before the emperor and receive her conferment. If she were to receive the title of prince, a public outcry would ensue. Your Majesty, please reconsider!"

Li Jianting studied Kong Qiu. "The Grand Secretary once taught me that 'the sovereign and his ministers ought to stand together in times of turmoil and peace.'[9] We should accept admonishments with grace if they are born of loyalty, and treat the valiant and the virtuous with magnanimity. Not only does Qi Zhuyin ably guard the frontiers on our behalf, she also captures and kills treacherous rebels for us in the capital. She offers us her sincerity and loyalty, yet we dwell on the petty distinction between men and women. Will not such an attitude turn the hearts of all the heroes and talents in the land cold with disillusionment?"

She rose and stepped forward to help Kong Qiu up, her expression earnest. "Teacher, as a woman, Marshal Qi is willing to don armor and slay the enemies of the state. Take away her heartfelt dedication to the service of her country, and all that remains is her faithful loyalty to her sovereign. What's more, am I not myself a woman? You have taught me without reservation, and now you assist me in governing the state. Is the distinction between men and women really so important?"

As Li Jianting appealed to him, she shifted from the imperial *we* to the common *I*. Yet Kong Qiu couldn't return from his role as the emperor's Grand Secretary back to merely her teacher.

Beyond her heartfelt words about Qi Zhuyin's service, there was another reason the new emperor wished to confer a title upon Qi Zhuyin. Zhongbo and Libei were both strong, with well-trained and powerful armies. Relying on only the Eight Great Battalions to defend the city walls of Qudu was like preparing to throw an egg against a rock. Only Qi Zhuyin, who held the three hundred thousand troops of Qidong in her hands, could go head-to-head with the rebels. It wasn't that Kong Qiu didn't understand; on the contrary, he understood all too well.

“Your Majesty’s conferment of a title by imperial decree is already very generous to Qidong. This noble rank is truly too much.” Once Qi Zhuyin was raised to the rank of prince, there would be no other military power in Great Zhou capable of keeping Qidong in check. The rise and fall of the entire dynasty would come to depend on her troops alone. And if she secured yet another victory in the coming years, what more could they offer her as a reward? She would have already attained the same position as Xiao Fangxu. Not only would there be nowhere for her to rise, there would be no more Libei to hold her in check.

Li Jianting knew all this too. But she also knew that however loyal Qi Zhuyin was, she was also on good terms with the Xiao Clan of Libei. This title was the only chip she had left to offer.

“There lies a sharp sword on the tongue that kills without spilling a drop of blood.”[10] Scissors in hand, Yao Wenyu was doing an abysmal job of trimming the potted plant on his lap. “Once the rumors spread, it will be difficult to eradicate them completely. The new emperor rewarded the Helian Marquis because our actions forced her hand. Mark my words, she still intends to kill him.”

“It seems to me that the new emperor takes after neither Xue Xiuzhuo nor Kong Qiu in her decisions.” Shen Zechuan bent to pick up the butchered stems from the ground. “She has her own mind.”

“She has ascended the throne and seen the world,” Yao Wenyu said. “How could she remain a willing pawn? She is already staking it all by raising Marshal Qi to the Prince of Donglie. Your Lordship has gained a slight upper hand in providing relief to Yongcheng, but you’ve also put You Tan in a perilous position. If the Helian Marquis confesses his name under torture, then our inside man in Liuzhou will be forfeit.”

“Once it’s completed, our new port in Liuzhou will see goods moving throughout the entire realm.” Shen Zechuan tossed the pruned stems into the pond. “The handling of tariffs at the port is of utmost importance. You Tan is not a fit candidate for such a role. Since Xue Xiuzhuo is unstoppable when it comes to auditing the accounts, we must warn You Tan to pay closer attention there. After all, he has a whole heap of bad debts at home. I fear he’ll be hard-pressed if he comes under scrutiny.”

You Tan was a money-grubber. A man like this was convenient to use, but not to retain. The most reliable connections Shen Zechuan had in Juexi were what remained of the Xi Clan's contacts, yet he had still chosen You Tan to do business with the Helian Marquis.

Yao Wenyu didn't pursue this in depth; his master seemed to have his own considerations for this choice. Even if Yao Wenyu saw through it, he wouldn't make it known. The plant on his lap grew more and more bare. "Per Ge Qingqing's latest report, Xue Xiuyi has already gotten what he wanted."

"A plum position indeed, in the palace depository, managing all incoming and outgoing supplies in the capital. As long as he's keen, he'll be able to fill his pockets. Xue Xiuyi has been the rich young master of a noble clan all his life. It's no surprise he couldn't stand becoming a destitute little clerk. Xue Xiuzhuo has been careful when it comes to promoting or conferring titles upon his kin. His reluctance to favor the Xue Clan has long incurred the disapproval of his family." Shen Zechuan paused to watch Jiran chase after Xiao Xun as they played at the end of the walkway. "After examining you that day, Jiran has never come back to check on you?"

"Xue Xiuzhuo is thorough in everything he does. He intended to kill me; he would never show mercy. Even if the venerable master were alive, there would be no cure for these legs or this poison. Jiran is young; you mustn't pressure him about it again." Yao Wenyu's expression was placid. "No need to force the matter. Let's leave it to heaven's will."

Xiao Xun fell on the ground and scrambled back to his feet, then ran away with bits of grass stuck to his clothes.

Yao Wenyu set down the scissors; he'd lost interest in the plant. "Libei's young heir is strong and healthy. He is neither arrogant nor delicate; he's intelligent by nature and excels in his studies. With the teaching and guidance of my lord's advisors, he is sure to live up to all of our expectations."

Shen Zechuan said nothing.

Yao Wenyu smiled. He gifted the potted plant to Shen Zechuan. "My lord still hesitates."

Shen Zechuan raised his good left hand and pointed with his fan toward the west. “That world is a cage.”

Qudu was the freest place in the land, and the world’s worst prison.

“A dragon could produce nine sons, and they would all differ from each other,” Yao Wenyu said. “Are the wolves of Libei only meant to run across the grasslands? The heir is bright and intelligent. Why not ask him?”

Xiao Xun was tired from playing, but his eyes were still bright. He insisted on holding Shen Zechuan’s hand as they walked back. As they passed the pond, he pointed at the water and said to Shen Zechuan, “Er-shushu, this is a bright mirror.”

He called Xiao Chiye *Er-shu*, second uncle, and so Xiao Chiye had taught him to address Shen Zechuan as *Er-shushu*, his little second uncle.

“That’s right,” Shen Zechuan said. “By looking in the mirror, you can straighten your clothes.”[11]

Facing the water’s surface, Xiao Xun patted his robe clean.

When Xiao Chiye was this age, he was still racing after colts and sleeping all day in the tall grass. Xiao Xun resembled his father in appearance, but from what Xiao Chiye had divulged, though Xiao Jiming had received far fewer beatings than Xiao Chiye as a child, even he hadn’t been as quiet and composed as his son.

“Did you come looking for Mister Yuanzhuo today to teach you?” Shen Zechuan asked.

Xiao Xun nodded. “Learning makes you wise.”

“There are many learned gentlemen in the manor.” Shen Zechuan raised his folding fan slightly to point at Yao Wenyu’s room. “Why do you pick him?”

“Mister Chengfeng said Mister Yuanzhuo is the most learned and knowledgeable of all.” Xiao Xun tilted his head back to look at Shen Zechuan. “I want the best.”

After a moment’s silence, Shen Zechuan asked, “And what if there was no Yuanzhuo?”

"Mister Yuanzhuo said, 'he who stands on his toes is unsteady, while he who takes overlong strides cannot go far'."[12] Xiao Xun pointed at himself. "Even with the best teacher in the world, I must first be able to understand. I can't reach for what is beyond my grasp."

The way he spoke was mature for his age. At merely seven years old, he had already far surpassed his peers in learning. Inspired by Yao Wenyu, the other advisors in the manor occasionally engaged in philosophical discussions when they had no government affairs to tend to. Xiao Xun was bored by these discussions, but whenever Xiao Chiye handled military business or Shen Zechuan discussed political affairs, he always sat off to the side and listened.

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"Are you working so hard because you want to become a learned man like Mister Yuanzhuo?"

A strange expression came over Xiao Xun's face. He shook his head. "I'm not learned. I want learned men." He pointed at Fei Sheng, standing guard. "And I'm not a general. I want generals too."

To the learned the sage beckons; into my trap the talented walk.[13]

Whether it be civil ministers or military generals, Xiao Xun wanted the best. This was a grand ambition that sought to recruit all the virtuous talents of the world beneath him.

Shen Zechuan squeezed Xiao Xun's hand and spoke no further.

After her ascension, the new emperor granted a general amnesty to all in the land, and many of the personnel in the Six Ministries received new posts. On the day of Xue Xiuyi's promotion to custodian of the palace depository, he held a great banquet on Donglong Street and invited everyone he knew. He wanted them all to witness his comeback.

After getting himself thoroughly drunk, he staggered home with Ge Qingqing's help. "The tables have turned. Fortune is on my side. What's more, I'm a legitimate son of direct descent." He held up a wobbling finger. "My courtesy name is Pingjing. Ping—Jing! *Serene*. Xue Xiuzhuo's courtesy name is Yanqing—*extending integrity*. *Whose* integrity?" He patted his own chest and laughed. "Mine. It's mine. I'm his eldest brother. It's only natural that I"—he paused to belch—"stand higher than him!"

Ge Qingqing swayed alongside him and concurred, "Yes, yes, it is just as my lord says."

"Lord," Xue Pingjing said loudly. "That's right. I'm the lord! Why do—do I have to take my cues from him? He's a lowdown son of a concubine who stole my position as the head of the family. He divided up the family estates and kicked us all out. He's really, the most…most cold-blooded and ruthless man." He waved his hand, as if to dismiss Xue Xiuzhuo from his consideration. "Look at him. He's become a vital minister of the court overnight, yet he won't even help out his own kin. Is this s-something a real man would do?"

Ge Qingqing let him ramble.

"You're all afraid of him." Every puff of Xue Pingjing's breath reeked of wine. "What's there to be afraid of? He's born to a low—*hic*—lowly maid! Back when we were in school, I could already tell he would never be satisfied with what he had." At this point, he began to choke up. "I'm his older brother! Why should he be more talented than me? When our family told him to write essays for me, he refused! Had he just done as he was told, I'd be an important minister now too!"

The longer Xue Pingjing cried, the sadder he became. He grasped the wall for support and puked.

"He said I favored my concubine…and neglected my son's studies… so he wouldn't allow me to even see my own child…" Paying no attention to the mess at his feet, Xue Pingjing covered his face and bawled. "How heartless can you be! Even if my son grows up to be an incompetent loafer, he's still my son! He stole another man's son. He's not fit to be called a human!"

Ge Qingqing soothed him. "Now that my lord has also been promoted and is familiar with the gonggong in the palace, there will be ample opportunities for you to get your son back."

Xue Pingjing wiped the tears from his cheeks and clutched Ge Qingqing's arm. Hatefully, he spat, "I watched him rise to the heights of power, and if I have my way, I'll watch him plunge all the way down!"

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Chapter 261:
Might of an Emperor

THE NEXT DAY at noon, the Helian Marquis headed to Mingli Hall to give thanks for his reward.

Fuman stopped him outside. "Your Lordship, please wait. Her Majesty is resting at the moment. She won't be able to see you until later." He turned aside and continued, "If my lord is not in a hurry, you can wait here for now."

The Helian Marquis had come expressly to demonstrate his loyalty. Since the rumors had begun to spread in Yongcheng, he'd been unable to sleep, fearing every moment that Li Jianting would fly into an imperial rage and throw the whole Fei Clan behind bars. He nodded at once and stayed right where he was, waiting in the sun.

It was noon, and the scorching heat was unbearable. After less than an hour, the Helian Marquis was sweating profusely. He didn't dare say a word, but his heart sank with every passing minute. Under the silent gazes of the eunuchs around him, he gradually became aware that he was suffering the new emperor's punishment.

"Your Lordship," Fuman called softly. "Why not wait in the side hall? It's so hot out."

The Helian Marquis squeezed out a smile and dabbed his brow with his sleeve. "I'm fine."

He was the one who had made arrangements for Yongcheng's relief grain. Now that his gesture had gone awry, he couldn't absolve himself of blame. If Li Jianting suspected him of colluding with the rebels, his head would surely roll. As long as he could keep his life, he was willing to wait on his knees, much less stand in the sun.

More minutes passed. He felt as if his back was pressed against a searing iron plate. His face was ghastly pale, and his sweat was no longer simply from the heat. His vision was swimming, and sheer willpower was all that kept him on his feet.

The beaded curtains swung slightly as Fengquan leaned out to announce in a soft voice, “Her Majesty is awake. Move quickly. Don’t hold Her Majesty up from government affairs.”

The eunuchs and palace maids waiting under the eaves filed in with basins in hand. Soon after, the Helian Marquis heard his name being called. Lifting the hem of his robe, he climbed the steps to the hall. Everything was a blur before his aged eyes, and he had to hold on to Fuman for support.

“Oh, dear.” Fuman looked worried. “My lord—is my lord okay?”

The Helian Marquis’s chest tightened, and his stomach churned with nausea—he’d been in the sun so long he had heatstroke. But Li Jianting was waiting in the hall, so the marquis hastily steadied himself, though both his legs were trembling. He murmured to Fuman, “I’m…I’m okay.”

“There are basins of ice inside,” Fuman whispered. “You can go in and cool down.”

The Helian Marquis strode through the door and knelt with his head lowered in obeisance. His voice was feeble as he said, “Th-this humble subject pays his respects to Your Majesty. Long live Your Majesty.”

Li Jianting did not look up from the memorial she held.

The Helian Marquis prostrated himself, not daring to move. He even quieted his breathing. The sweat on his brow dampened his sleeves.

“We have seen from Liang Cuishan’s memorial that the Fei Clan has encroached on the commoners’ fields in Chuancheng.” Li Jianting took a sip of the cooled tea on her desk and continued gently, “Did you know about this?”

All the sweat on his body turned cold. “This humble subject is aware. The Chief Surveillance Bureau has impeached this humble subject, while the memorandum issued by the Grand Secretariat has asked the officials from the Ministry of Justice to work in collaboration with the Ministry of Revenue to audit the field taxes in Chuancheng. Xue Xiuzhuo of the Court of Judicial Review has also been asked to supervise.”

“The Ministry of Revenue is saying the Fei Clan of Chuancheng conspired with the Pan Clan of Dancheng and the Han Clan of Wucheng to deceive the imperial court, embezzle tax money, and inflict harsh

punishments on the commoners under your care. To escape this, hundreds of people fled Chuancheng last year. Is this all true?"

The Helian Marquis was burning with anxiety. Lifting his head, he took a few gulps of air and blurted desperately, "Th-this humble subject dares not—"

"You dare not?!" Li Jianting flung the memorial at him. "Are you saying no one in Chuancheng died of starvation last winter? Not only did you collude with the Pan Clan, you conspired with the merchants of Juexi and used the Chuancheng commoners' grain to ingratiate yourself with those rebels! Did you think we didn't know? Did you think the Grand Secretary was unaware? The imperial court has had its eyes on you leeches for a long time!"

The Helian Marquis flattened himself almost to the ground. Tears in his eyes, he cried, "Your Majesty, Your Majesty! During the reign of Xiande, the Hua faction and Pan faction monopolized state power with the abetment of the empress dowager. This humble subject had no choice but to do as they wished to preserve the lives of my family!" He knocked his head against the floor and sobbed. "The common folk of Chuancheng are like my own sons and daughters. They've been under the charge of my Fei Clan since the great founder of the dynasty established the empire. If this subject hadn't been pushed into a corner, I would never have had the gall to commit such an inhuman act! As for the grain—Your Majesty, this humble subject saw how worried Your Majesty was over providing relief to Yongcheng. I couldn't help but feel anxious myself, and that was how I fell for that traitor Shen's trap!"

In the face of imminent death, the Helian Marquis wised up and disavowed himself of any involvement with the rebels, taking special care not to mention Yan Heru.

"Han Cheng was a tyrant. Numerous times, he attempted to coerce this humble subject into helping him commit regicide and proclaim himself emperor." The Helian Marquis's face was awash in tears as he raised his head to look at Li Jianting. "But this humble subject is a court minister of the Li Clan. I could *never* take his side! During the banquet that night, this subject put my own life on the line to protect Your Majesty. I deserve

punishment for my crimes, but I ask that Your Majesty spare my son and daughter in consideration of our great founder's eternal kindness…"

Li Jianting seemed moved by his words. "That's right. In an act of kindness, our imperial ancestor handed the eight cities to you people. Yet for the sake of your own profits, you committed such a grave mistake."

"This subject is aware that my crime deserves death." The Helian Marquis sobbed. "My family owes several tens of thousands in field taxes… This debt—even if there is only one person left in the Fei Clan, we will spare no effort to pay it back."

As long as the Helian Marquis lived, not only would he return all of the misappropriated fields, he'd also make up for the arrears in field taxes. Chuancheng's location held more strategic importance than Dancheng's. It was close to Dicheng, connected to the waterways, and inextricably linked to Juexi. There really was a chance he could make up the sum he owed. But like the rest of the wily old foxes in the noble clans, the Helian Marquis carefully didn't mention how long it might take for this sum of field taxes to be fully paid.

Li Jianting turned away from him, seemingly in contemplation. After a time, she said, "Your crimes are unforgivable. But the fact that you were willing to help the people of Yongcheng is a testament to your lingering conscience. We shall spare your life."

Relieved, the Helian Marquis bowed low again. "Your Majesty is gracious—"

"However. You formed cliques for your own selfish ends, betraying the favor our imperial ancestor showed your clan. The title Helian Marquis can no longer be retained." She didn't even give him a chance to gasp for breath before continuing, "And then there is the matter of your encroachment on the commoners' fields."

The Helian Marquis's heart leapt into his throat.

"Fuman," Li Jianting called toward the door. "Drag those lowlifes out."

Fuman acknowledged her order, and soon after, the guards escorted several men in shackles into the open space before the hall and forced them to kneel. Pushing himself up, the Helian Marquis looked back through the

beaded curtain and realized that these were all officials he himself had placed in the Chuancheng yamen.

"Our imperial ancestor may have handed Chuancheng to the Fei Clan, but the eight cities still take the surname Li. It is only by virtue of our amnesty that you escape the death penalty today. These people have deceived their superiors and subordinates, trampled the law, and committed countless atrocities." Li Jianting strode up to the marquis and patted him gently on the shoulder. "They forced the common people out of their homes. They deserve to die. Fuman!"

Fuman raised his voice. "Ready—*strike!*"

The moment the word left his mouth, the iron-wrapped staff struck human flesh. The Helian Marquis shuddered down to his toes at the sound.

The prisoners' mouths were gagged. They hadn't been dragged out to the Duancheng Gate as per the usual flogging rules, nor were they wrapped in cotton padding. They remained in only their inner garments, their official robes long since stripped from them. The staff-wielding eunuchs were all old members of the Eastern Depot, and they struck with intent to kill. A few hits later, all that was left was a bloody pulp of mangled flesh.

The Helian Marquis's ears were buzzing. It was cool inside Mingli Hall, but that only made him shiver harder. As the sounds of flogging continued, one of the prisoners tilted his head back. The blood in his mouth soaked through the white cloth gag as he sobbed and whimpered at the marquis. All of Mingli Hall was quiet, the eunuchs standing in solemn silence with their hands at their sides. Only the *thud, thud, thud* of the flogging persisted.

After an hour, the acrid stench of blood filled the air.

Li Jianting didn't look at the marquis again. "You may go."

The Helian Marquis tripped over himself scrambling up and fell back onto his knees on the cold, hard floor. Fuman flicked a look at the junior eunuchs, and they hoisted the marquis up to march him out. As they stepped through the vast pool of blood, the marquis's downcast eyes widened.

Reflected in that crimson puddle was his own official's robe.

He staggered a few steps and felt the world spin. In the next moment, he passed out cold from fright.

Li Jianting sat back in her chair. Through the shadows cast on the window, she could see Fuman ordering the guards to clear the bodies from the ground.

Fengquan picked up the memorial off the floor and said quietly, "This scene is truly horrifying."

"You've never seen true carnage." Li Jianting's eyes were hidden from view in the shadows. "When the pox ran rampant through Dancheng, desperate refugees crowded the entrance of Qudu. Some of them tried to dig their way in through the ditches. The ditches clogged with their bodies until the stench of corpses hung in the air. No one saved them. *That* was truly horrifying."

Fengquan set the memorial down so lightly his fingers never touched her desk.

"Tough times call for tough governance." Li Jianting paused. "Let the Helian Marquis live a while longer. Has Xue Yanqing come to see you recently?"

Bending at the waist, Fengquan answered, "He came to inquire after Your Majesty's wellness."

"Cen Xunyi is a longtime veteran of the imperial court. His misgivings regarding Zhongbo are evidence of his foresight. We rejected Xue Yanqing's ideas this time," Li Jianting said. "We ought to make it up to him."

"Lord Xue keeps his hands clean and lives frugally even at home. He has quite the reputation in the Imperial College for just this reason. If Your Majesty were to reward him with money and treasures…" Fengquan lowered his eyes, trailing off.

Li Jianting pondered this. "Jiang Qingshan has made meritorious contributions in raising grain, and he treats the common people as his own children. Let the Grand Secretary draft a memorandum. I've heard his wife, a woman from the Liu family, has an equally virtuous reputation. Reward them together."

Jiang Qingshan was Xue Xiuzhuo's capable right-hand man in Juexi; in rewarding him, she would also appease Xue Xiuzhuo. Besides, Li Jianting still had more uses for Jiang Qingshan. There was currently no one holding the new Prince of Donglie, Qi Zhuyin, in check. But the Qidong Garrison Troops needed military provisions, and Li Jianting had placed the key to those granaries in Jiang Qingshan's hands.

Fengquan acknowledged the order at a murmur and retreated, his footfalls careful and quiet.

"The new emperor has shown her mettle. Her application of checks and balances is impressive." Xiao Chiye pushed aside the military reports on the desk and read through the news from Qudu again. "To pacify Xue Xiuzhuo, she rewarded Jiang Qingshan. In doing so, she can keep a leash on the grand marshal and hold him as leverage against Xue Xiuzhuo at the same time. He holds sway over the pragmatist faction and the Imperial College."

"Xue Xiuzhuo put a new emperor on the throne so easily—who's to say he couldn't do it again? She's right to be wary of him. Jiang Qingshan is a major official and successful administrator of a vast region, but he never received the Li Clan's favor during the eras of Xiande and Tianchen. Now, he will enjoy a meteoric rise." Shen Zechuan, sitting across from him, set aside a letter from Yu Xiaozai. "But I do find her method of dealing with the Helian Marquis unexpected."

"It is." Xiao Chiye looked up at him. "She's bold."

Shen Zechuan had truly never expected Li Jianting to use such a tactic as flogging corrupt officials to death to intimidate the Helian Marquis. He dipped his brush in ink. "I thought she would find an excuse to have him killed. She is surprisingly patient."

"The Helian Marquis originally made excuses and cried poverty. Now he's been so frightened he's desperate to make up the deficit, even going so far as to sell his manors." Xiao Chiye slouched in the chair and tilted his face up to the ceiling. "The girl emperor adopts a policy of both benevolence and intimidation. She's more flexible than the relentless Xue Xiuzhuo. Upon seeing how she treated the Helian Marquis, the noble clans

will surely take the initiative to make up the tax deficit now, hoping it will give them the same slim chance of survival."

The Grand Secretariat had begun investigating these accounts in the first place for the sake of the fields and money. Had there been no Shen Zechuan or Xiao Chiye in the equation, Li Jianting would perhaps have gone with Xue Xiuzhuo's method and insisted on getting to the bottom of each case. But this girl was unbelievably shrewd: She had seen that there was truth in Cen Yu's words. Compared to the Eight Great Clans, Shen Zechuan was a far more terrifying threat.

"Impressive." Shen Zechuan held up the brush and traced Xiao Chiye's eyes in the air. "Now this is a real emperor."

"I never used to believe any person is born to be emperor, but she is indeed extraordinarily gifted. And to think she spent only five years studying in a noble's estate." Xiao Chiye leaned across the table and took hold of Shen Zechuan's wrist. "Want your prize?"

"I was in the Temple of Guilt for only five years too." Under the table, Shen Zechuan kicked off his wooden clog and inched his foot up along the inside of Xiao Chiye's calf. He loosened his grip on the brush and let it drop onto the table, leaving a streak of ink across the paper.

Pressing a finger down on the bridge of Xiao Chiye's nose, he said, "Hurry up and give it to me."

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Chapter 262:
Separate Ways

"IF I DO, I'm afraid I'll break your back," Xiao Chiye said, the ghost of a smile tugging at his lips.

Although Jiran had given no explicit instructions, it was true that Shen Zechuan's waist and back couldn't handle the physical exertion.

Shen Zechuan wavered. He was about to set his foot back down when Xiao Chiye grasped his ankle and pressed Shen Zechuan's foot against himself.

"Ohh." Shen Zechuan dragged out the word lazily. "So you want me to quench my thirst with the sight of plums and sate myself on fantasy."

"It's getting late." Even so, Xiao Chiye didn't let go.

Shen Zechuan was about to say more, but the hand on his ankle began to wander.

"If Marshal Qi is still averse to deploying troops by the ninth month, I won't wait any longer." Xiao Chiye's clothing was all in order. Looking only at his upper body, no observer would notice anything amiss. Even his voice was no different from how it usually sounded.

"If her moves so far are any indication, this girl emperor won't agree to the grand marshal's deployment. Besides…" Shen Zechuan's voice melted away.

Xiao Chiye had taken off his sock.

The tablecloth hung down, hiding the space beneath. Spurred by Xiao Chiye's guiding hand, Shen Zechuan's knee pressed against the bottom of the table. The arch of his bare foot was treading on that intricately woven robe, and the fine material rubbed against his sole, its softness a sheath for the hardness within.

"Besides, Marshal Qi has to consider the five commanderies too." Xiao Chiye picked up the discussion right where Shen Zechuan had left off. "Penetrating deep into the desert takes time and effort. She has to weigh her

priorities. It's possible not even Qi Shiyu would endorse such a prolonged campaign."

The corners of Shen Zechuan's eyes reddened, betraying the waves of heat rising in him. "Just the other day, you told General Lu you would wait for Qidong."

"The girl emperor hadn't shown her mettle then. Based on how things are going, the chances of Qidong deploying troops are slim." Xiao Chiye released his teasing grip on Shen Zechuan's foot. "This year, you solved the problem of food by gathering grain from the four prefectures of Huaizhou, Chazhou, Cizhou, and Hezhou. Although we made it for the spring plowing, we've lost the Huaizhou granary. Now that Tao Ming has fled, the imperial court will send someone else to manage it. It'll be hard to make any deal with them again next year. And with the Port of Yongyi closed and the Xi Clan's copper mines shut down, the business from Libei's trade market will be cut in half. Lanzhou, we can't afford to feed the Qidong Garrison Troops again next year."

Although Qudu hadn't provided any grain when Qidong moved against the Qingshu tribe recently, Qi Zhuyin hadn't hesitated. Inquiring minds in the imperial courts had to be wondering where her confidence came from. Aside from Shen Zechuan, who in the world could be generous enough to feed a whole garrison? Xue Xiuzhuo was no fool. He was well aware of who had given the garrison troops their grain. He simply hadn't rubbed the knowledge in Qi Zhuyin's face.

When Qidong had deployed troops this year, they had left the military fields of three of the five commanderies untended, which meant the harvest would be diminished accordingly. As a result, Qi Zhuyin would require even more provisions from outside Qidong than in the past. The only thing worth rejoicing over was that the spring plowing in the commoners' fields had proceeded as usual, so she only had the military's stomachs to worry about. Even so, the amount of food necessary to feed three hundred thousand soldiers was frighteningly large, never mind the rations needed to sustain an invasion in the desert. Such an expedition was on a wholly different scale from the attacks she'd led against the Qingshu tribe and Gedal.

After their victory at Duanzhou, Zhongbo's expenditure for fortifications and defense was bound to increase. Not only that, the newly rebuilt form of the six prefectures was beginning to take shape. Shen Zechuan had to supply year-round military provisions to Zhongbo's one hundred and twenty thousand garrison troops on top of supplying Libei's hundred and twenty thousand armored cavalrymen. If they added the Qidong Garrison Troops to the equation, Shen Zechuan alone would be shouldering the burden of five hundred and forty thousand men and horses.

"Wang Xian wrote to me. He said he sent you a letter a fortnight ago laying out the stakes." Xiao Chiye shifted into a more comfortable position. "You didn't reply."

The sole of Shen Zechuan's foot was still pressed up against the bulge in Xiao Chiye's pants. Leaning back in his chair, Shen Zechuan said, "Half a month ago, the advisors had yet to draw up a proposed budget. I set Wang Xian's letter aside until I could answer it."

"The advisors in the manor are good, but they come mostly from the countryside, not the capital. They are talented, but not as familiar with this work as court officials like Wang Xian. Wang Xian served as the Secretary for the Ministry of Revenue and often engaged with the Ministry of War. Every year he had to deal with officers like me who came to the capital demanding money and grain. There's probably no one better acquainted with the military expenditures and grain requirements of the various regions."

While Xiao Chiye had been resting at home, he'd been spending his time mulling over this issue of the military provisions. It would be wonderful for the three armies to join forces—but it was likely too difficult.

The equipment of the Libei Armored Cavalry wore out too fast, and the supply squadron had to escort craftsmen for repairs in addition to transporting materials and provisions. Once the supply squadron stepped across the front lines, there were no roads constructed that could take them further east. The barren grounds of the desert were the territory of the Twelve Tribes—the squadron transporting military provisions would require an escort of additional troops for their protection, but increasing manpower meant increasing provisions yet again. And the farther east the Libei Armored Cavalry went, the more they would consume. Furthermore,

they had to prepare for all contingencies along the way. It was much harder planning an invasion than fighting a defensive battle.

"Last year, Xue Xiuzhuo abandoned Luoxia Pass and the Xues' ancestral city of Quancheng and put his focus on the thirteen cities of Juexi instead. We didn't think much of it at the time." Shen Zechuan sighed; worry knit his brows. "Only now do I see how impressive a move this was."

Who wouldn't want Qi Zhuyin's military might for their own? Shen Zechuan wanted it too. If he held the five commanderies of Qidong, it would be impossible for Qudu to turn the tide even if Li Jianting were the Guangcheng Emperor reincarnated. All along, Xue Xiuzhuo had ignored the fighting in Zhongbo and Libei. He had stood by at the start of the year as Shen Zechuan recruited soldiers and bought horses, and he hadn't even pursued the matter of where Qidong's military grain had come from. Yet it seemed he had just been biding his time while Shen Zechuan continued to burn through his resources.

"Jiang Qingshan is truly an exceptional administrator. No wonder the emperor wants to use him to control Xue Xiuzhuo. That man has shouldered the burden of all of the Zhou empire's granaries with his dauntlessness alone." The look in Xiao Chiye's eyes was deep and penetrating. "Lanzhou, the battle you're about to fight is even harder than mine."

Shen Zechuan had delayed answering Wang Xian's letter out of consideration for Xiao Chiye. Similarly, Xiao Chiye was now giving up on the Qidong Garrison Troops out of consideration for Shen Zechuan.

Xiao Chiye pushed back the chair and bent to pick up Shen Zechuan's wooden clogs. He didn't put them on for Shen Zechuan, but set them neatly aside. Relinquishing his grip on Shen Zechuan's foot, he leaned over to stroke his cheek. "I'll fight mine by myself," he whispered.

This time, when the corners of Shen Zechuan's expressive eyes reddened, it wasn't from the tides of passion.

The watchman's clapper struck, marking the late hour. Fengquan, still awake, sat on a stool, leaning against the foot of Li Jianting's bed and

hugging his knees. After almost an hour, he heard Li Jianting say from behind the lowered drapes, “Aren’t you going to sleep?”

He buried his chin in his knees, partially concealing his delicate face. “Your Majesty has had difficulty sleeping for several days. Maybe we should summon an imperial physician after all.”

Li Jianting opened her eyes and turned her face away. “I’m just not used to sleeping here.”

Silence descended over the palace hall.

“Did you ever meet Shen Zechuan?” Li Jianting asked.

“I saw him during the reign of Xiande, when he had just been released from the Temple of Guilt.”

“Rumors have it that his mother was a dancer from Duanzhou.” Li Jianting seemed to find it hard to believe. “Is this true?”

“Yes.” Fengquan shifted his numb legs. “He’s the eighth son of Shen Wei, of common birth. He wasn’t favored in the Prince of Jianxing’s manor. They sent him away to a private residence in Duanzhou very early on. He’s connected somehow to Ji Gang, who used to be a vice commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard when he was alive. When Duanzhou fell, Shen Zechuan was in the Chashi Sinkhole.”

After a moment of silence, Li Jianting said, “Qi Huilian is quite a character, to cast aside his prejudices and impart all his knowledge to him without reservation.”

“Perhaps. But Shen Zechuan is small-minded and vindictive.” Fengquan turned his head to the side. “There was bad blood between him and Ji Lei, so he made Ji Lei suffer a fate worse than death. That day at the banquet, if Han Cheng hadn’t been so thickheaded as to keep resisting, Your Majesty might very well have stripped him of his position and exiled him to Zhongbo. Then we would have seen how Shen Zechuan treated him—no doubt he would’ve made Han Cheng wish he were dead.”

The shadows of the trees outside stretched over the ground. The palace this late at night was deathly still.

Li Jianting suddenly changed the subject. “Are you Mu Ru’s younger brother by blood?”

A crack appeared in Fengquan's placid expression, but he didn't reply rashly.

"You were a eunuch even before Mu Ru entered the palace. But she was already Prince Chu's favored concubine back then. Why did you have to enter the palace to suffer?" Li Jianting's gaze shifted slightly toward him. "You're not like Fuman, who went to the Eunuch School, but you're well-versed in the classics. Given Mu Ru's background, just being able to read would be impressive in itself."

Fengquan immediately knelt on the ground. "This…this humble servant—"

"We can see that your ears aren't newly pierced. But the former emperor never rewarded you with earrings; it's highly unlikely that he would've rewarded any eunuch so. Boys who wear precious gems on their ears at an early age are usually of noble blood. Fengquan"—Li Jianting propped herself up and paused for a moment before peering through the lowered drapes—"where exactly did you come from?"

The qin strings shuddered discordantly, jolting Qiao Tianya out of his trance. He raised his hand to rub the center of his brow, only to realize that the skin on the pad of his finger had torn.

"Marshal Qi surely has yet to reply because she's displeased with the governor for proposing she hand over the Qingshu tribe's territory to Haerigu…" Yao Wenyu paused and looked through the curtain into the inner chamber.

"This is a tough one. We worry about creating a rift with Qidong." Kong Ling followed Yao Wenyu's gaze and called, "Songyue seems restless. Why not come out and have tea with us?"

Qiao Tianya wiped the blood off with his thumb and leaned back in the rattan chair with a smile. "If it's at Mister Chengfeng's invitation, how can I refuse?"

He rose, setting the qin on the table, then lifted the curtain and stepped out.

The weather was fine today, and a tea table had been set up under the eaves. Rather than discussing official business, it looked more like the gentlemen were merely enjoying tea. Yao Wenyu was dressed in a green robe with wide sleeves. When he lifted his cup to take a sip, the red cord around his wrist slid in and out of sight.

Qiao Tianya sat down without fuss on the chair beside Yuanzhuo.

"What fine tea is this?" Qiao Tianya said as he accepted the cup Gao Zhongxiong handed him. He took a sniff before saying, "Oh, the Height of Spring from Hezhou."

"Don't be misled by his appearance." Kong Ling pointed at Qiao Tianya. "He might look like an army ruffian, but he is, in fact, a tea connoisseur."

"One must make merry while one can."[14] Qiao Tianya sipped his tea. "If I had money, I'd only want to satisfy my appetite for food and drink. I'm happy to spend whatever's necessary for a taste of fine tea and good wine."

Eyes lowered, Yao Wenyu said, "You should learn from Shenwei."

Gao Zhongxiong hurriedly waved his hands. "On the contrary, I envy Commander Qiao. Me, I just want to save up enough to marry a virtuous wife after all this is over."

"Songyue isn't married yet." Kong Ling asked him, "Are you not anxious about it?"

"Just look at that old Fei the Tenth. He's not married, is he? None of them is in a hurry, so of course, I need to get hitched as soon as possible." Qiao Tianya set down the teacup and said with a straight face, "I've been yearning after their wedding gift money so much I can't sleep at night."

Everyone around the table burst into laughter.

Qiao Tianya turned to look at Yao Wenyu. "Mister Yuanzhuo isn't married either. Are you anxious?"

The flowers on the branch above them fluttered gently down onto Yao Wenyu's sleeves. He turned to meet Qiao Tianya's gaze. When the breeze blew past, it carried a hint of his slightly bitter medicinal scent to Qiao Tianya.

“Used to be,” Yao Wenyu answered. “But it doesn’t matter now that I have Hunu.”

Other than Qiao Tianya, no one present knew much about Yao Wenyu and Commandery Princess Zhaoyue. They had all heard rumors that the commandery princess was going to marry him, so they very naturally concluded he was referring to her.

“If you ask me, there are three regrets in life. Not being born as Hunu is one of them.” Qiao Tianya reached out to pick up Hunu, but used the chance to grasp Yao Wenyu’s wrist behind the cat’s furry body. “Or I could have rested all day and night on your lap, living out my fantasies.”

Yao Wenyu’s expression went blank with embarrassment. He hadn’t expected Qiao Tianya to be so bold. Flustered, he began to cough.

“Commander Qiao says such surprising things! It’d be wonderful to hear you engage in a philosophical discourse with Yuanzhuo.” Gao Zhongxiong sighed. “Who knows if I’ll ever have the chance to see Yuanzhuo’s literary grace on full display again.”

“Idle rhetoric is detrimental to the state.” Yao Wenyu raised his hand to cover his mouth, and a hint of red peeked out from his sleeve again. “I wasn’t finished earlier. Marshal Qi’s lack of reply means she’s displeased with the idea of Haerigu in her lands. When all’s said and done, we weren’t the ones who conquered the Qingshu tribe’s territory. We can’t force the issue.”

Kong Ling nodded. “I worry Marshal Qi will hold a grudge against His Lordship because of this.”

“We want to leverage one force to fight another,” said Yao Wenyu. “But Haerigu is a Biansha Scorpion, after all. It’s reasonable for Marshal Qi not to trust him.”

“That’s only part of it.” Kong Ling exchanged a glance with Yao Wenyu and slowly shook his head. “The worst case would be if Marshal Qi suspects His Lordship is threatening Qidong with this proposal.”

“The Qingshu tribe’s lands are close to the Bianjun Commandery,” Yao Wenyu said. “Even if Marshal Qi doesn’t see it as a threat, the generals of Qidong will. They’ve had enough of being held under duress by the

military inspector eunuchs of Qudu. They will never agree to let the Scorpions be the prefectural governor's eyes on them."

"If Qidong is unwilling," Kong Ling said, "then all we can do is make other plans."

A single candle burned in the military tent. Qi Zhuyin sat with one leg propped on the other, massaging her neck absently as she listened to Qi Wei's report.

"Tell Lu Guangbai to stop sending letters. His twenty thousand infantrymen can move at the drop of a hat; he's the only one who can operate without the burden of supplies." She stared up at the top of the tent. "Neither Jiming nor Xiao Chiye has brought the matter up again since their first request."

"General Lu has served under you for a very long time," Qi Wei said. "He knows how capable you are. Of course he wants to persuade you to deploy troops."

"I understand his desire to fight the Biansha Horsemen." Qi Zhuyin frowned slightly. "But Great Zhou has never gone so deep into the desert before. It's a long journey with dangers lurking on all sides. Once all three armies march east, who's going to ensure the safety of our home turf? There are still Scorpions in Qudu."

Qi Wei understood her predicament, which was why he hesitated. "If the marshal rejects them now, I fear you may earn the infamy of selling your integrity for a title."

No sooner had Qudu conferred on her the rank of Prince of Donglie than she had turned against her allies in Zhongbo and Libei. Meanwhile, her garrison troops still subsisted on Shen Zechuan's grain—anyone who caught word of this would condemn her.

"As they wish." Qi Zhuyin's tone was nonchalant. "Nothing in the world is harder to control than wagging tongues."

"It's a tricky road to navigate. In Zhongbo's view, providing grain to feed the garrison troops is an act of mercy," Qi Wei said. "But if Libei hadn't been tied up in such a dire war up north, leaving Zhongbo exposed

and in need of our aid, Shen Zechuan wouldn't have offered us grain so readily."

"People like him scheme after the whole world. He knows how to grasp an opportunity." Qi Zhuyin's profile was serious. There was no trace of her usual cheeky smile. "In helping Libei, I was helping myself. And now, I'm also helping myself by not deploying troops. Qidong and Libei are brothers in adversity, but now that the crisis in Libei is quelled, Ce'an's desire to push farther into the desert might also be viewed as a proud general exhausting his resources for the sake of conquest. Ever since the empire fractured, refugees abound. The battles this year and last were inevitable. I can see it too—Amur is showing signs of fatigue. It's an excellent time to crush his alliance of six tribes. But the eight cities' granaries are empty, and commoners are dying on the streets. There's drought in Yongcheng, yet Jiang Qingshan must still find a way to supply grain to Qudu and Qidong in the autumn—grain that will be taken from the mouths of the people. Of Shen Zechuan's six prefectures, three only produce enough to feed their populace, so he must also rely on the granaries in Hezhou. Sure, it would feel good to fight Biansha—but I can't go."

Since the emergence of the incredible Amur, the six tribes of Biansha had become the bane of Zhou's generals. If Libei emerged victorious after this deep incursion into the desert, then no matter who sat on the throne in the future, the names of the Libei Armored Cavalry and Xiao Chiye would go down in history. As a general, who wouldn't want to test themselves against such an opponent?

Qi Zhuyin snuffed out the candle, plunging the tent into darkness. She sat for a moment, then said, "I'll dictate; write this down. Tell Shen Zechuan that even if the Qingshu tribe's territory goes to waste, I will not permit Haerigu to set a single foot onto it. Next, tell Xiao Jiming that though I've seen him as a bosom friend since childhood, we of the Qi clan are still subjects of the Zhou empire. Fighting foreign foes together is my duty, but empowering Zhongbo is treason. Finally, tell Lu Guangbai that I wish him great success in his military exploits and in seeking redress for his previous humiliation, but this time, I will not be traveling alongside my little brother."

A lone goose cried at the moon as it sailed across the horizon of the Bianjun Commandery. Qi Wei tucked the letters away and turned to leave

the tent. Yellow sand rustled under his boots.

Many miles away, Lu Guangbai scooped up a handful of the yellow sand at his feet. He stood with his back to the dusky sky, the letter he'd written to Qidong still in his hand. He squatted for a while, then folded the letter and tucked it away. The sand in his palm trickled back to the ground.

Grand Marshal Qi, treat this letter as you would me.

When I left the commandery without authorization, it was a dereliction of my duty. In this, I have failed the people of Qidong. It is a wrong I cannot rectify except by slaying our enemies on the battlefield. I will always be a general under your command. Although we may not fight this battle together, with the mountains, rivers, and the bright moon as my witness, I swear, I will not fail you.

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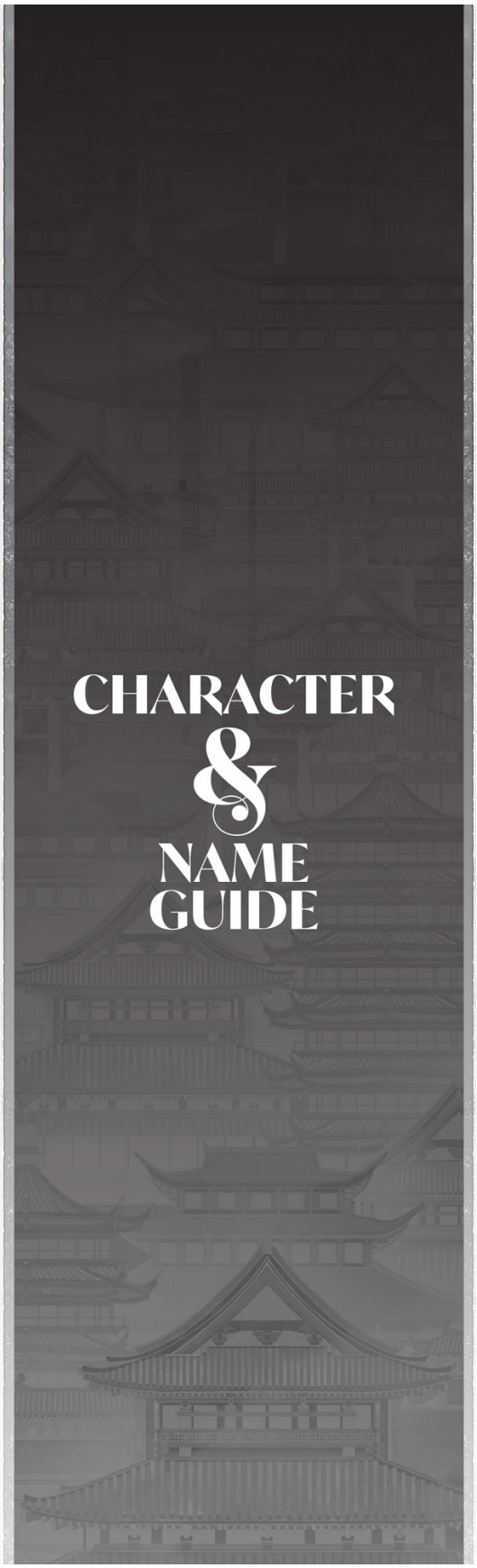
CHARACTER
&
NAME
GUIDE

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Characters

Main Characters

SHEN ZECHUAN

沈泽川 **SURNAME SHEN; GIVEN NAME ZECHUAN, "TO NOURISH THE RIVERS"**

COURTESY NAME: Lanzhou (兰舟 / orchid; boat)

TITLE: Prefectural Governor

WEAPON: Avalanche (仰山雪 / Yang Shan Xue) : A straight, single-edged saber longer than normal swords. It used to belong to Ji Gang's adoptive father.

The eighth son of common birth to Shen Wei, the Prince of Jianxing. Forced to shoulder the ignominy of his father's alleged collusion with the enemy during the invasion of Zhongbo that led to the slaughter of thirty thousand soldiers in the Chashi Sinkhole, he has since risen to rule the province of Zhongbo in defiance of the faltering Zhou empire.

XIAO CHIYE

萧驰野 **SURNAME XIAO; GIVEN NAME CHIYE, "TO RIDE ACROSS THE WILD"**

COURTESY NAME: Ce'an (策安 / spur; peace)

TITLE: Supreme Commander of the Imperial Army

WEAPON: Wolfsfang (狼戾 / Langli): A single-edged executioner's blade forged by the best craftsman in Qidong.

The second and youngest son of lawful birth to Xiao Fangxu, the Prince of Libei. Now also called Er-ye, or Second Master Xiao.

QUDU

CEN YU 岑愈: Courtesy name Xunyi. The Left Censor-in-Chief of the Chief Surveillance Bureau.

CHEN ZHEN 陈珍: Minister of War.

COMMANDERY PRINCESS ZHAOYUE 照月: Daughter of the Helian Marquis and wife of Pan Yi.

FEI KUN 费坤: The Helian Marquis. Father of Fei Shi and Zhaoyue.

FEI SHI 费适: Lawful son of Fei Kun, the Helian Marquis.

FENGQUAN 风泉: A junior eunuch, Pan Rugui's "grand-godson" and Mu Ru's younger brother. Promoted to Director of the Seal at the Directorate of Ceremonial Affairs. Li Jianting's personal eunuch.

FUMAN 福满: A eunuch of the inner palace.

GE QINGQING 葛青青: Judge of the Embroidered Uniform Guard who served under Ji Gang when the latter was still the vice commander. Currently stationed in Juexi to keep a tight watch over the Xi Clan.

HAI LIANGYI 海良宜 ("VIRTUOUS AND PROPER"): Courtesy name Renshi. Once the Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat and teacher to Yao Wenyu.

HAN CHENG 韩丞: Chief commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard after Ji Lei's death.

HAN JIN 韩靳: Military Commissioner of the Eight Great Battalions.

HUA HEWEI 花鹤娓: The empress dowager, widow of the Guangcheng Emperor.

KONG QIU 孔湫: Courtesy name Boran. The current Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat.

LI JIANHENG 李建恒: The Tianchen Emperor. As the final survivor of the Li Clan, he ascended the throne after the death of the Xiande Emperor.

LI JIANTING 李剑霆 ("SWORD; THUNDER"): Originally named Ling Ting 灵婷 ("clever; pretty"). After the passing of the Tianchen Emperor,

she is brought forward as the imperial heir to the throne.

LI JIANYUN 李建云: The Xiande Emperor. Son of the Guangcheng Emperor and elder brother to Li Jianheng.

LIANG CUISHAN 梁濯山: Courtesy name Chongshen. A member of the Ministry of Revenue who works under Pan Lin.

PAN LIN 潘蔺: Courtesy name Chengzhi. Vice Minister of the Ministry of Revenue and lawful son of Pan Xiangjie.

PAN XIANGJIE 潘祥杰: Minister of Works. Head of the Pan Clan of the Eight Great Clans.

PAN YI 潘逸: Prefect of Dancheng. The second son of the Pan Clan, born of the first concubine. Pan Lin's younger brother. Husband to Commandery Princess Zhaoyue.

PAN YUAN 潘远: The younger brother of Pan Lin and Pan Yi, of common birth.

QI HUILIAN 齐惠连: Grand mentor to the deceased crown prince of Yongyi, and later, Shen Zechuan's teacher.

WEI HUAIGU 魏怀古: Former Minister of Revenue.

XI HONGXUAN 奚鸿轩: Former Secretary of the Bureau of Evaluations in the Ministry of Personnel. Xi Gu'an's brother and the second son of lawful birth in the Xi Clan.

XIAO-WU 小吴: A young member of the Embroidered Uniform Guard sent to Juexi with Ge Qingqing.

XUE XIUYI 薛修易: Courtesy name Pingjing. Xue Xiuzhuo's elder brother of lawful birth.

XUE XIUZHUO 薛修卓: Courtesy name Yanqing. Assistant Minister in the Court of Judicial Review. A capable young official and son of common birth in the Xue Clan.

JUEXI

JIANG QINGSHAN 江青山 ("GREEN HILLS"): Provincial Administration Commissioner of Juexi.

XI DAN 奚丹: Steward of the Xi Clan.

LIBEI

CHEN YANG 晨阳 ("MORNING SUN"): Leader of Xiao Chiye's guards.

GU JIN 骨津: Guard to Xiao Chiye. He has excellent hearing.

GUO WEILI 郭韦礼: Commanding general of Third Sand Camp.

JIANG SHENG 蒋圣: Commanding general of Second Sand Camp.

LU GUANGBAI 陆广白 ("EMPTY EXPANSE"): Former commanding general of the Bianjun Commandery in Qidong. Brother to Lu Yizhi and one of the current Four Great Generals, known as "Beacon-Smoke and Rising Sand."

LU YIZHI 陆亦栀: Heir Consort of Libei. Xiao Jiming's wife and Lu Guangbai's sister.

TANTAI HU 澹台虎 ("TIGER"): Member of the Imperial Army.

VENERABLE MASTER YIDENG 一灯: A monk skilled in medicine. Before that, he was a layman from Hezhou.

WU ZIYU 邬子余: The youngest general in Libei; was commanding general of Border Camp until Xiao Chiye took over.

XIAO FANGXU 萧方旭 ("RISING SUN"): Prince of Libei. Father to Xiao Chiye and Xiao Jiming, and one of the past Four Great Generals of the empire of Zhou.

XIAO JIMING 萧既明 ("APPROACHING BRIGHTNESS"): Current Prince of Libei and commander of the Libei Armored Cavalry. Xiao Chiye's elder brother; he is married to Lu Yizhi, Lu Guangbai's sister. One of the current Four Great Generals, he's known as "Iron Horse on River Ice."

XIAO XUN 萧洵: Grandson-Heir of Libei. Lawful son of Xiao Jiming and Lu Yizhi.

ZHAO HUI 朝晖 ("MORNING SUN"): Xiao Jiming's dependable deputy general.

ZUO QIANQIU 左千秋: Xiao Chiye's shifu and one of the current Four Great Generals, he's known as "Thunder on Jade Terraces."

QIDONG

HUA XIANGYI 花香漪 ("RIPPLES OF FRAGRANCE"): The third lady of the Hua Clan and adored niece of the empress dowager. Wife of Qi Shiyu.

LU PINGYAN 陆平烟 ("PACIFY BEACON SMOKE"): Lu Guangbai's father and one of the past Four Great Generals of the Zhou empire.

QI SHIYU 戚时雨 ("TIMELY RAIN"): Qi Zhuyin's father and one of the past Four Great Generals of the empire of Zhou.

QI WEI 戚尾: Deputy General to Qi Zhuyin.

QI ZHUYIN 戚竹音 ("SOUND OF BAMBOO"): Grand marshal of the Qidong Garrison Troops. One of the current Four Great Generals, Qi Zhuyin is known as "Windstorm through the Scorching Plains" and commands all five garrisons in the commanderies of Qidong. Her weapon's name is Banisher.

ZHONGBO

DING TAO 丁桃: Young guard to Xiao Chiye. He carries a little notebook everywhere he goes.

FEI SHENG 费盛: Son of common birth in the Fei Clan. Once an assistant commander in the Embroidered Uniform Guard, now a leader of Shen Zechuan's personal guards.

GAO ZHONGXIONG 高仲雄: Courtesy name Shenwei. Former student of the Imperial College; currently works for Shen Zechuan in Cizhou.

HAERIGU 海日古: A Scorpion who defected from Gedal.

HUO LINGYUN 霍凌云: Eldest lawful son of Huo Qing, the former commander of the Dengzhou Garrison Troops. Now serving under Shen Zechuan as vice commander of the newly established Embroidered Uniform Cavalry.

JI GANG 纪纲: Shen Zechuan's shifu. Once the vice commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, he is one of the three adopted sons of Ji Wufan, the former chief commander of the Embroidered Uniform Guard.

JIRAN 既然: A young monk, disciple of Venerable Master Yideng.

KING YI OF FANZHOU 翼王: A commoner who rose in rebellion and proclaimed himself king.

KONG LING 孔岭: Courtesy name Chengfeng. Chief advisor to Zhou Gui, prefect of Cizhou.

LEI CHANGMING 雷常鸣: A bandit chief in Zhongbo. His base was Mount Luo.

LEI JINGZHE 雷惊蛰: A bandit of Mount Luo. The eldest common son of Lei Changming's sister and Zhu Jie, the commander of the Duanzhou Garrison Troops during the reign of Yongyi.

LI XIONG 历熊 ("BEAR"): A youth who was taken in and raised by Lei Jingzhe.

LUO MU 罗牧: Courtesy name Mengzheng. The prefect of Chazhou. He and Kong Ling were students together.

QIAO TIANYA 乔天涯 ("EDGE OF THE WORLD"): Previously named Qiao Songyue. The former judge of the Embroidered Uniform Guard, he now takes Shen Zechuan as his master. Commander of the newly established Embroidered Uniform Cavalry.

WANG XIAN 王宪: Once the Secretary of the Ministry of Revenue, who was later transferred to Zhongbo.

YAN HERU 颜何如: The youngest young master of the prodigious merchant Yan Clan of Hezhou.

YAO WENYU 姚温玉 ("GENTLE JADE"): Courtesy name Yuanzhuo. Hai Liangyi's only acknowledged pupil, said to be an extraordinary talent. After being poisoned by Xue Xiuzhuo, he traveled to Cizhou, where he became Shen Zechuan's strategist.

YIN CHANG 尹昌: Commander of the Cizhou Garrison Troops.

YU XIAOZAI 余小再: Courtesy name Youjing. Previously the Investigating Censor in the Chief Surveillance Bureau, he left Qudu after losing his position and joined Shen Zechuan in Cizhou.

ZHOU GUI 周桂: The prefect of Cizhou.

BIANSHA

ACHI 阿赤: The leader of the Black Scorpions who succeeded Haerigu.

AMUR 阿木尔: The Great Hero hailing from the Liaoying tribe who went on to become Libei's archenemy.

BAYIM 巴音: Huhelu's deputy general, transferred to Hassen after Huhelu's death.

DALANTAI 达兰台: Current chieftain of the Youxiong Tribe.

DORLAN 朵儿兰: Hassen's wife, a young lady from the Hulu tribe.

HUHELU 胡和鲁: From the Changjiu Tribe. Amur's adopted son and a capable general, deceased.

HASSEN 哈森: Son of Amur. His mother holds a high status in the Hanma tribe. Has striking red hair.

JORIL 卓力: A Lizard who serves Amur.

SUKHEBASU 苏赫巴兽: The Ferocious Tiger of the Youxiong Tribe. Feng Yisheng's friend and enemy.

PAST

BAI CHA 白茶 ("WHITE TEA"): Shen Zechuan's mother. A dancer from Duanzhou.

FENG YISHENG 冯一圣: One of the past Four Great Generals of the empire of Zhou. Adopted father to Zuo Qianqiu.

JI MU 纪暮: The only son of Ji Gang and Hua Pingting, and Shen Zechuan's adoptive elder brother.

GUANGCHENG EMPEROR 光诚帝: Father to Li Jianheng and Li Jianyun, husband to Hua Hewei, the current empress dowager. His reign is titled the "Yongyi" years.

HUA PINGTING 花娉婷: Wife of Ji Gang and mother of Ji Mu; Shen Zechuan's shiniang. She was born in the Hua Clan.

SHEN WEI 沈卫 ("DEFENSE"): Prince of Jianxing and Shen Zechuan's father. Found guilty of colluding with the Biansha Horsemen to invade Zhongbo, he allegedly self-immolated to evade justice.

SHAO CHENGBI 邵成碧: Former Vice Minister of the Ministry of War.

TANTAI LONG 澹台龙: Tantai Hu's deceased older brother. Was the commander of the Dunzhou Garrison Troops before his death.

Institutions

THE EMBROIDERED UNIFORM GUARD 锦衣卫

The Embroidered Uniform Guard, sometimes referred to as the Scarlet Cavalry, are the elite bodyguards who report directly to the emperor. They are a non-military secret police and investigative force. The Embroidered Uniform Guard is organized into the Twelve Offices, which include the Carriage Office, Umbrella Office, Elephant-Training Office, and Horse-Training Office, among others. The Xiuchun saber, a single-edged blade, is their signature weapon.

THE IMPERIAL ARMY 禁军

The Imperial Army of Qudu was once the Imperial Guard of the eight cities and the impregnable fortress of the imperial palace in Qudu. However, with the rise to power of the Eight Great Battalions, their duties were reduced significantly, and the Imperial Army became a dumping ground for sons from old military households. They are one of the two major military powers in Qudu.

THE EIGHT GREAT BATTALIONS 八大营

Led by a member of the Eight Great Clans, the Eight Great Battalions are one of the two major military powers in Qudu, tasked with patrolling and defending Qudu against external forces. Responsible for defending Qudu, the capital city and heart of the Zhou empire, the Eight Great Battalions hold the empire's life in their hands.

THE EIGHT GREAT CLANS 八大家

The Eight Great Clans originated from the Eight Cities of Qudu. One clan holds sway in each city—the Xue Clan of Quancheng, Pan Clan of Dancheng, Xi Clan of Chuncheng, Fei Clan of Chuancheng, Hua Clan of Dicheng, Yao Clan of Jincheng, Han Clan of Wucheng, and Wei Clan of Cuocheng.

THE GRAND SECRETARIAT 内阁

The most distinguished and influential body in the central government, it is staffed with Grand Secretaries who are responsible for handling the emperor's paperwork, recommending decisions in response to memorials received from the officials, and drafting and issuing imperial pronouncements.

THE SIX MINISTRIES 六部

The Six Ministries comprise the primary administrative structure of the Zhou empire's central government and include the Ministry of Works, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Personnel, Ministry of Rites, Ministry of Revenue, and Ministry of War. Coordinated by the Grand Secretary of the Grand Secretariat, the heads of these ministries report directly to the emperor.

The Six Offices of Scrutiny is an independent agency set up to inspect and supervise the Six Ministries. It includes the Office of Scrutiny for Revenue.

CHIEF SURVEILLANCE BUREAU 都察院

Also known as the Censorate. One of the major agencies of the central government, responsible for maintaining disciplinary surveillance, auditing fiscal accounts, checking judicial records, carrying out inspections, impeaching officials for misconduct, recommending new policies and changes in old policies, and other duties involved in regulating government actions.

THE COURT OF JUDICIAL REVIEW 大理寺

An important central government agency responsible for reviewing reports of judicial proceedings, making recommendations for retrials, and participating in important judicial proceedings at court alongside the Chief Surveillance Bureau and the Ministry of Justice, which are collectively known as the Three Judicial Offices.

THE LIBEI ARMORED CAVALRY 离北铁骑

The Libei Armored Cavalry is a heavy cavalry established by Xiao Fangxu to counter external foes at the northern front during the Yongyi era, when the Biansha Horsemen repeatedly assaulted Luoxia Pass. Currently commanded by Xiao Jiming, the Heir of Libei.

THE QIDONG GARRISON TROOPS 启东守备军

Under the command of Qi Zhuyin, the Qidong Commandery Garrison Troops are stationed across five commanderies. They watch over the Qidong territories in the southern regions of the Zhou empire, which are led by the Qi Clan.

THE BIANSHA HORSEMEN 边沙骑兵

The Biansha Horsemen are the aggressor forces against the empire of Zhou. The story begins with the aftermath of the war, where the Biansha Horsemen ravaged the six prefectures of Zhongbo and left them piled high with bodies. Also referred to in derogatory form as the "Biansha baldies."

THE TWENTY-FOUR YAMEN 二十四衙门

Collectively refers to the Twelve Directorates, Four Offices, and Eight Services under which eunuchs serve.

Names Guide

Names, Honorifics, and Titles

COURTESY NAMES VS GIVEN NAMES

Usually made up of two characters, a courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. Traditionally, this was at the age of twenty during one's crowning ceremony, but it can also be presented when an elder or teacher deems the recipient worthy. Though generally a male-only tradition, there is historical precedent for women adopting a courtesy name after marriage. Courtesy names were a tradition reserved for the upper class.

It was considered disrespectful for one's peers of the same generation to address someone by their given name, especially in formal or written communication. Use of one's given name was reserved only for elders, close friends, and spouses.

This practice is no longer used in modern China but is commonly seen in historically inspired media. As such, many characters have more than one name. Its implementation in novels is irregular and is often treated malleably for the sake of storytelling.

DIMINUTIVES, NICKNAMES, AND NAME TAGS

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

XIAO-: A diminutive prefix meaning "little."

-ER: An affectionate diminutive suffix added to names, literally "son" or "child." Not to be confused with Xiao Chiye's nickname, Xiao Er, in which "er" (二) means "second."

-LANG: A suffix meaning young man. A term of address often used toward one's lover or husband.

LAO-: A diminutive prefix meaning "old."

-ZI: Affectionate suffix meaning "son" or "child."

-XIONG: A word meaning elder brother. It can be attached as a suffix to address an older male peer.

FAMILY

DI/DIDI: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

GE/GEGE/DAGE: Older brother or an older male friend.

JIE/JIEJIE: Older sister or an older female friend.

MARTIAL ARTS AND TUTELAGE

SHIFU: Teacher or master, usually used when referring to the martial arts.

SHIXIONG: Older martial brother, used for older disciples or classmates.

SHIDI: Younger martial brother, used for younger disciples or classmates.

SHINIANG: The wife of one's shifu.

XIANSHENG: Teacher of academics.

OTHER

-GONGGONG: Term of address for a eunuch.

GONGZI: Young man from an affluent household.

-JUN: An address meaning "lord"

SHIZI: Title for the heir apparent of a feudal prince.

-YE: An address meaning "master."

LAO-ZUZONG: Literally "old ancestor," an intimate and respectful term of address from a junior eunuch to a more senior eunuch.

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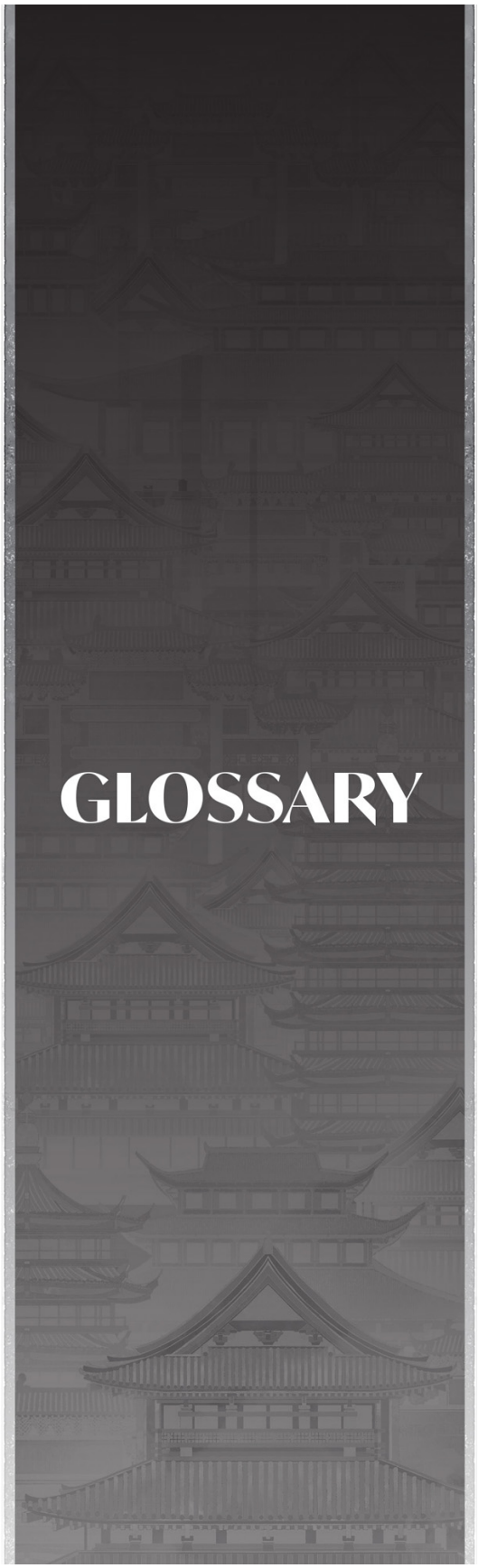
GLOSSARY

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Glossary

CALENDARS: The traditional Chinese calendar is a combination of the lunar and solar calendars. Like the Gregorian calendar, one year also contains twelve months with twenty-nine to thirty days per month, but respective dates do not line up with the Gregorian calendar. In general, the first through third months are considered spring, the fourth through sixth months are summer, the seventh through ninth months are autumn, and the tenth through twelfth months are winter. New Year's Day, which is the first day of the first month on the traditional Chinese calendar, typically falls on a day between late February and early March on the Gregorian calendar.

CONCUBINES AND THE IMPERIAL HAREM: In Imperial China, it was common practice for a wealthy man to take women as concubines in addition to his wife. They were expected to live with him and bear him children. Generally speaking, a greater number of concubines correlated to higher social status; hence a wealthy merchant might have two or three concubines, while an emperor might have tens or even a hundred.

The imperial harem had its own ranking system. The exact details vary over the course of history, but can generally be divided into three overarching ranks: the empress, consorts, and concubines. The status of a prince or princess's mother is an important factor in their status in the imperial family, in addition to birth order and their own personal merits. Given the patrilineal rules of succession, the birth of a son could also elevate the mother's status.

IMPERIAL EXAMINATION SYSTEM: The system of examinations in Imperial China that qualified someone for official service. It was intended to be a meritocratic system that allowed common civilians to rise up in society as a countering force to the nobility, but the extent to which this was true varied across time.

The imperial examination system was split into various levels. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, these were the provincial exam, metropolitan

exam, and the palace exam. The top scholars at each examination level were known as the Jieyuan, Huiyuan, and Zhuangyuan respectively, and a scholar who emerged top at all three levels was known as the Sanyuan, or Triple Yuan, scholar.

LAWFUL AND COMMON BIRTH HIERARCHY: Upper-class men in Imperial China often took multiple wives. Only one would be the official wife, and her lawful sons would take precedence over the common sons of the concubines. Sons of lawful birth were prioritized in matters of inheritance. They also had higher social status and often received better treatment compared to the other common sons born to concubines or mistresses.

MANDATE OF HEAVEN: The Mandate of Heaven is the approval of heaven that justifies and legitimizes the rule of the emperor, also known as the Son of Heaven, over the people. If the emperor is not a virtuous ruler and fails to fulfill his obligations, he will lose the mandate and the right to govern. Signs of a loss of mandate include societal unrest and uprisings, foreign invasions, natural disasters, and similar calamities.

OFFICIALS: Civil and military officials were classified in nine hierarchic grades, with grade one being the highest rank. Their salaries ranged according to their rank. Referral by someone in a position of power, such as a noble, a eunuch, or another official, was the traditional path to becoming a court official. Another path, which later gained popularity as a way of combatting corruption and political cliques, was going through the imperial examination.

OFFICIALS OF COMMON BACKGROUNDS: Despite coming from affluent, possibly landowning, families, these officials were said to be from "common backgrounds" because they were the first court officials in their family. This is in direct contrast to the noble officials, who consolidated their power over time by forming a familial network with other officials and using their influence to raise their younger generations to officialdom.

UNITS OF MEASUREMENT:

li (里): A traditional unit of length equal to approximately 500 meters or 1,640 feet.

chi (尺): A traditional unit of length equal to approximately 13 inches.

dan (石): A dry measure for grain equal to approximately 100 liters.

dou (斗): A dry measure for grain equal to one-tenth of a dan.

YAMEN: An administrative office or department, or the residence of a government official. For example, that of a local district magistrate or prefectural prefect. This is not the same as the Twenty-Four Yamen run by the eunuchs.

YELLOW REGISTER: In the Ming and Qing dynasties, households were classified and recorded into the Huangce (黃冊) or yellow registers according to their occupations, which remained unchanged from one generation to the next. These records provided information for taxation, as well as corvée and military conscription. Households were mainly divided into three categories: civilian, military, and trades, with civilians further divided into subcategories like scholars, farmers, or builders. Apart from the "good civilians" or 良民, there also existed a permanent underclass of slaves or 賤籍, who were born into their class or relegated as punishment for crime.

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About the Author

Tang Jiu Qing is an internationally renowned author who writes for the novel serialization website JJWXC. She started the web serialization of *Ballad of Sword and Wine: Qiang Jin Jiu*, in 2018. Her published works include *Nan Chan* and *Time Limited Hunt*, among others.

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Footnotes

Chapter 238: Searing Urgency

[1] The Hanshi Festival, also known as the Cold Food Festival, takes place on the day before the Qingming Festival, or Tomb Sweeping Day

Chapter 239: Jianting

[2] A quotation from History of Ming, Vol. 139 (“Biographies” No. 27): A warning from Emperor Hongwu, Zhu Yuanzhang, to his minister Ru Taisu.

Chapter 254: Jiran

[3] A couplet attributed to Song dynasty poet Shen Yifu and his teacher in Records of Inspired Responses by Liang Zhangju, a scholar from the Qing dynasty.

[4] A passage from the Diamond Sutra, an influential Buddhist sutra.

Chapter 257: Tea Talk

[5] Second uncle.

[6] Reference to a line describing scholar-generals in the Book of Wu, a historical record compiled by the Kingdom of Wu in the Three Kingdoms era.

Chapter 258: Small Fish

[7] From Chapter 60 of the Dao De Jing by Chinese philosopher Laozi, considered the founder of Daoism.

Chapter 259: Rumors

[8] Lines from the poem “Three Verses of Mei Pass” by general and politician Chen Yi (1901–1972).

Chapter 260: Conferment and Reward

[9] Lines from Essentials of Government in the Zhenguan Reign, a compendium on statecraft from the Tang dynasty.

[10] A quote from Lin Lan Xiang, an anonymous vernacular novel from the Qing dynasty.

[11] A line attributed to Emperor Taizong of Tang in The Old Book of Tang, compiled by Liu Xu: “He who uses bronze as his mirror can tidy his apparel; he who uses history as his mirror can see the rise and fall of a dynasty; he who uses other people as his mirror can understand his own strengths and weaknesses.”

[12] From Chapter 24 of the Dao De Jing by Chinese philosopher Laozi, considered the founder of Daoism.

[13] Lines spoken by Emperor Taizong of Tang in reference to the imperial examinations, which scholars took to earn a place as an official within the emperor’s government.

Chapter 262: Separate Ways

[14] A line from the poem “Bring in the Wine” (“Qiang Jin Jiu”) by Tang dynasty poet Li Bai.

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UNDER SIEGE

Having at last consolidated the six prefectures of Zhongbo under his rule, Shen Zechuan stands between two looming threats: the Biansha Horsemen to the east, and the imperial court of Qudu to the west. Although Qudu remains paralyzed by internal strife, Shen Zechuan knows it's only a matter of time before the fledgling emperor and her supporter, Xue Xiuzhuo, turn their eyes to him.

To the north, while Hassen continues to hammer Libei's generals with relentless attacks, Xiao Chiye suspects his real target lies along the vulnerable border of Zhongbo. If he's right, Shen Zechuan will be cut off and surrounded before reinforcements arrive.

Yet when Hassen's attack comes, it is with a brutality no one anticipated. Forced to make a desperate stand, Shen Zechuan must hold the walls until Xiao Chiye arrives—or the city falls.

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